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RANCH ROMANCES

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25c

SECOND JULY NUMBER

FEATURING

SPURS FOR A TRAIL BOSS

by Walker A. Tompkins

WAR ON THE RAMHORN

A New Serial

by Elsa Barker

Good

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

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RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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Bride Wants Friends

Dear Editor:

Have been reading RANCH ROMANCES from one end of the U.S.A. to the other—and I enjoyed every copy. Now I would like my letter entered in Our Air Mail. I'm married, age 36 and stand 5'10" and have brown hair and green eyes. Love to make new friends and write letters. So come on, all of you, write to me.

MRS. JUNE PRIOR

Route 2
Crystal Falls, Michigan

Lonely Widow

Dear Editor:

This is something I have never done before, so I hope my plea will be printed. I'm a widow and would like someone my own age, which is 58, to write to me. I'm 5'2" tall and weigh 150 lbs. My hobby is flowers and I work in my garden all the time. Please fill my mail box. I read RANCH ROMANCES and think it's just fine.

RUTH McQUIRE

R.F.D. 1
Dade, Fla.

Medium Rare

Dear Editor:

I hope that you have space to print my request for pen pals. My ship has recently returned from the Mediterranean and is now in the Navy Yard at Boston for repairs. I'm 37, 5'11" and weigh 174 lbs. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I'm enthusiastic about sports, enjoy music, classic and popular, literature, and legit theater. And exotic foods—though my favorite is steak, medium rare. To me, all people are interesting. I'll positively answer all correspondence—and hope it's abundant.

THEODORE SWEENEY BMC

U.S. Block Island CVE-106
EPO New York, N.Y.

Mighty Small

Dear Editor:

I am 17 years old and go to Rich Township H.S. in Park Forest. I'm 4'11" and weigh 100 lbs. I have short brown curly hair and big blue eyes. My favorite sports are basketball, baseball and swimming. My hobbies are reading, watching T.V., skating and traveling. I have two sisters and one brother. I hope to hear from lots of people soon.

RUTH MATTHUS

22427 Ridgeway Ave.
Richton Park, Ill.

Mail Call

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I have ever tried to gain pen pals by writing in to a magazine. I'm a lonesome girl as I never receive any mail except from my father who is in Korea. I am 21 years old, 5'2" tall, blonde hair and blue eyes. I weigh about 120 lbs. My favorite sports are horseback riding, dancing, and swimming. I play the piano and sing hill-billy songs.

BERNADETTE ALLAN

47 Mayo St.
Portland 3, Maine

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

New Zealand Lad

Dear Editor:

Please, I would like you to print my plea asking for pen pals as I am very lonely and don't get very much mail. I have no time during the working day to make personal friends. I'm 5'5" tall with brown hair and hazel eyes, and I weigh 130 lbs. I have been a knitting-machine operator for seven years. I like to dance, and films, boating, reading. So come on all you people in the good old U.S.A. and drop me a line.

MINNIE LENNON

22 Sylvia Road
St. Heliers Bay
Auckland, New Zealand

Poetic Marine

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES and I think it is a wonderful magazine—and most of my buddies think so too. I guess you think it's funny for a marine to read a love magazine, but marines have hearts too. Here are a few words from my heart, "Loving a marine isn't fun, he works and he plays to get the job done; no, loving a marine isn't fun, but it's worth it when the job is done." I have blue eyes, and stand 5'8" tall. Come on, you gals—WRITE. . . .

P.F.C. LYNN CARRALL 1413725
Baker Co. 1st B att. 4th Marine
3nd Marine Div. F.M.F.
c/o Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, Calif.

Likes Good Clean Life

Dear Editor:

I'm writing you about your RANCH ROMANCES stories which to me are very good

(Continued on Page 113)

She dared everything to hold his love!

"You're my girl, Frannie, but you gotta prove you have what it takes!"

"From that moment on I did anything Rip Allen wanted. I lied, cheated, stole to keep his love. There was no turning back—not even from taking dope—when you were Rip Allen's girl."

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

AN INDIGNANT Adel, Iowa, resident sued the city for $25,000 because he was in an "exhausted and dehydrated condition" and officials had ordered tavern owners not to serve him any beer.

IN SAN FRANCISCO a man picked up by police explained that he was carrying a spring-blade knife, pliers and a hammer under his coat because the heel of his shoe kept working loose.

A SAN MATEO, Calif., lady reported to police that a man phoned saying he was a telephone repairman, asked her to whistle over the phone, then promised to send her a box of bird seed the next day, and hung up.

AN EXTERMINATOR in Littleton, Colo., was picked up by police after he'd cleared a store of all pests—and $700 in cash.

IN SEATTLE, Wash., an over-cautious man put $40 in a sock he wore to bed, woke up the next morning still wearing the sock—minus the $40.

IN PHOENIX, Ariz., detectives are looking for the folks who sent a housewife a $5 basket of flowers, two pairs of levis, a wedding cake and a maternity outfit—all C.O.D.

A BURGLAR who broke into an Indianapolis envelope company for the sixth time in nine months left a note reading: "I do not steal for money. Just for a pastime. Thank you."

AN ALBUQUERQUE MAN released from prison after having served a term for robbing the National Carloading Co., was picked up one day later for breaking into the National Carloading Co.

IN GLENDALE, Calif., a man arrested after 17 robberies explained that "A guy said he pulled 104 jobs, so I started out to break his record."

A LADY IN LOS ANGELES got a divorce after six months of marriage when she testified that her husband had demoted her to housekeeper since he'd found a new love.

A LONGVIEW, Tex., resident was surprised when two boys discovered 15 sticks of dynamite under his house recently. Police were surprised, too, that the house hadn't blown up. . . . And in Longview, Wash., a man reported that his car had been stolen from a parking space on Route 99, where he'd left it in March 1952.

A NATURE LOVER in Oakland was sentenced to one to ten years in prison for picking flowers—$2,000 worth, in a greenhouse.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Drums Across the River

Filmed in Technicolor, Universal-International's latest is based on an exciting slice of Old West history

IT ISN'T absolutely necessary to be the protegé of a famous star to get into the movies, but it helps—especially if you are a horse. The one I have in mind is Flying John, a 3-year-old quarter horse belonging to Audie Murphy.

Feed bills are pretty high these days, so even though Audie isn't exactly destitute he decided a big handsome critter like Flying John might as well pay his own way.

"I tried to get him into my last picture, *Tumbleweed*," said Audie, "but Flying John got the same sort of answers any young actor gets— 'no experience,' 'wrong type,' and 'we'll let you know.' I had to ride a mangy-looking cayuse with 15 years' experience instead."

But in Audie's new picture for Universal-International, *Drums Across the River*, Flying John finally got his break, "and from now on," grinned Audie, "I'm having his feed bills sent directly to him."

It isn't absolutely necessary, either, to be the sister of a famous star to get into the movies, but, likewise it helps. When U —I wanted to borrow Debra Paget from the Fox studio, Debra was too busy to take the part—but her kid sister wasn't. She dressed up to look as old as possible and arrived just in time for Debra's appointment.

She had a sample song-and-dance routine and, as she says, "an awful lot of nerve." She impressed the casting office enough to win a contract, and two days later she reported to the studio, but not to get the fat part offered to her sister. Lisa had to spend eight months at school on the lot and win her high-school diploma before she began to act.

"It was the toughest curriculum I ever heard of," says Lisa Baye. "The studio calls it 'a million dollar program' to develop talent, and believe me, there's not one possible talent you might have that they don't try to develop. You learn everything from how to act down to how to ride sidesaddle."

Both of these accomplishments came in

handy for Lisa in her first starring part in *Drums Across the River*. It's the story of a pioneer mining town, where the gold is petering out. The miners know that right across the river the lodes are rich, but that's in Ute territory, off-limits to prospectors, according to a treaty they've signed with the Utes. Some of the people in the town, including Lisa's father, want to break the agreement. They make a fight look like an Indian ambush in order to arouse the townspeople against the Utes.

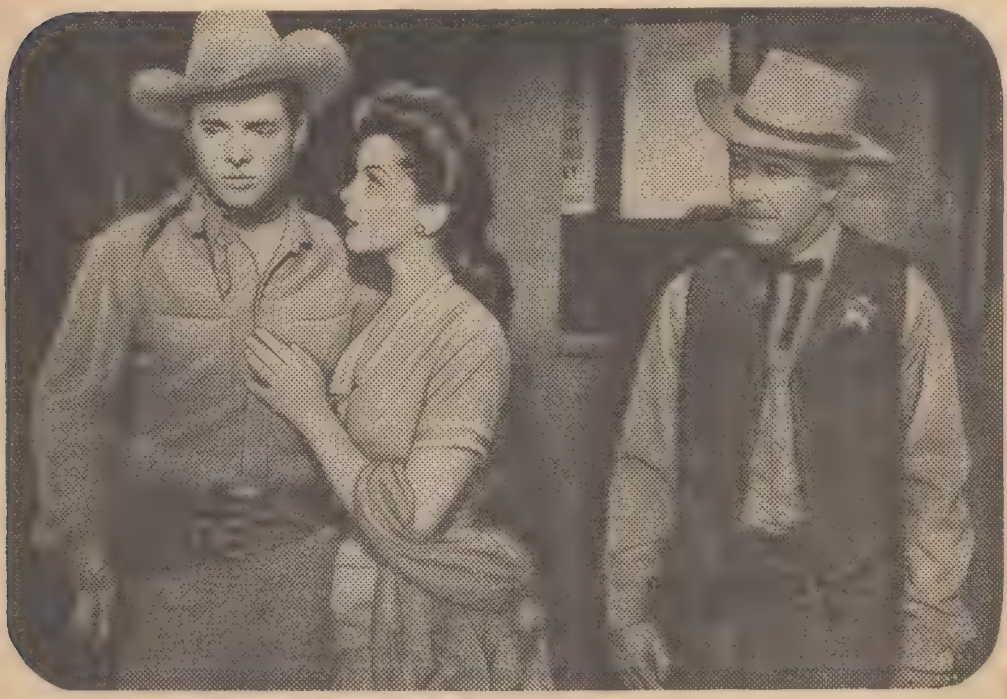
Finally there are only two men in town who side with the Indians—Audie and his father, Walter Brennan. Audie is framed for the holdup of a gold shipment and Walter is taken prisoner. Everyone else in town—except Lisa— accepts the leadership of the gang that wants to march into Indian territory and take it by force. And in the meantime, from across the river, suddenly there comes the ominous rolling of Indian war drums.

That's all of the story you're going to get from me. The thrilling, violent climax is much better seen in action than told in words.

The story was suggested by an authentic historical incident in which the Indian chief, Ouray, played a part. Unfortunately the movie couldn't be filmed in its actual locale, because the only accessible part of the Ute territory in Colorado has been defaced by a forest fire.

So California scenery was used instead, beautifully filmed in Technicolor as it has been so many times, yet always managing to seem new.

There's one often-used location spot that you'll see for absolutely the last time in *Drums Across the River*. That's the lovely valley near Kernville. While the company of 125 were there the place hummed with activity, but soon afterwards it became a silent and lonely place forever. Right now it's the bottom of a 50,000 acre lake, part of a flood-control project of the U.S. Army Engineers.



The two principals and the sheriff share a dramatic moment

Donna plays any part well—big-sister, wife, mother, or actress

DONNA REED
Oscar Winner

IT WASN'T the lure of a Hollywood career that made Donna Reed leave the old Iowa homestead. "Acting was the farthest thing from my mind," she told me. "I just wanted an education, and I thought there must be some easier way of earning a living than farming."

Things certainly hadn't been easy for Donna up till then. She was the eldest of five children, and they were always in her care. "Mother and Dad had their hands full with the farm work, and all the kids were expected to help as soon as they were big enough. I was the biggest so I was expected to be the most help."

After she had graduated from high school, she went to Los Angeles to stay with an aunt and put herself through business college. At first she earned money by washing dishes, but as her skills improved she got part-time secretarial jobs.

The first time the idea of a movie career occured to her was after she was elected Campus Queen—and even then she didn't think of it herself.

"You see, I'd been elected campus queen before, out in high school in Iowa. So I didn't take it very seriously when it happened again in Los Angeles. You can imagine my surprise when three offers for screen tests arrived the next day."

But Donna had still a few months to go before she got her diploma, and she sensibly decided to finish her business course first. She was one of the lucky ones for whom opportunity knocked twice, and less than a week after she'd graduated she put away her notebook and typewriter for keeps and went into an MGM movie, *The Get-Away*. She was still not convinced that acting was for her, and wrote to her family saying that she was delaying her search for a secretarial job, "pending further study of the movie business."

The "pending" is in its fourteenth year now, and Donna—especially after her Oscar-winning performance in *From Here to Eternity*—is finally convinced that she's permanently an actress.

All through her career she's played "nice girls" and though they were often rather dull girls, Donna never objected. She thinks that her long experience as one demure female after another has helped her in the more glamorous roles she's getting now.

"If a woman wants to be alluring," she says, "nothing is more embarrassing than her being obvious about it."

Donna in real life manages to be more glamorous in skirts and sweaters than most girls in bathing suits. She wears only one kind of hat, and it's practically a trade mark. She has dozens of little jockey caps, in every imaginable color.

"I just think that if you find a hat that's becoming, why change it?" she explains.

Donna has been married for nine years to the Hollywood producer and agent Tony Owen. They have a boy and girl who were adopted, and a five-year-old boy of their own. Donna loves her colonial home in Beverly Hills and attends to its management herself. She plans all the meals, and once a week she cooks a real farm dinner for the family.

Her hobby is photography, and she has quite a collection of equipment.

"The trouble is," she admits sadly, "it takes more than gadgets to take a good picture."

If you ask me, a girl as photogenic as Donna is silly to worry about taking a good picture of anyone else.

SPURS

for a TRAIL BOSS

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

TRAILHERDER SPENCE was too young to know the hazard he faced. But he learned fast when he met Riolett

SPENCE finished checking his wrangler's cavvy corral and then headed for the chuckwagon. Trouble faced him when he told the crew they could not have a spree in Jumpoff's saloons tonight—trouble he might not be able to handle.

He could see the men silhouetted around Frijole Joe's cookfire. They were tense and sullen tonight, lacking their usual hoorawing and tomfoolery.

Brad Spence had sensed the rebellion brewing in his crew ever since the herd had left the Pitchfork below Cotulla a month ago, Abilene-bound. Tonight found them at the south bank of the Red

River; tomorrow would see them out of Texas—providing Spence had any crew left tomorrow.

This was only his second drive up the Chisholm Trail, his first as Colonel Crain's herd boss. At twenty he was young for such a job, but a hitch in the Confederate cavalry, enlisting at sixteen, had brought an early maturity to Spence.

At least there would be no trouble with the cattle tonight, likely. The bedground was bordered on three sides by a U-bend of the river, making nighthawk duty easy. Only the softest of winds whispered through the roundabout chaparral. There would be no moon to play tricks with shadows and spook some ringy old bull into starting a stampede. He didn't have to worry about the cattle.

It's my crew, Spence thought bitterly. They've got a bellyful taking orders from a boss as young as I am. It's Kaywood's fault.

Yes, tonight was the showdown for Spence. The crew could see the lights of Jumpoff clustered along the north bank of the Red, painting waggly yellow tracks on the black gliding water.

Over there were saloons and brothels and gambling dens, waiting to make them forget the hard work of the three weeks on the trail, coming up from Colonel Crain's home range below the Nueces.

Across the river, Jumpoff offered whisky and the warmth of women's lips, the music of the roulette ball, the clatter of poker chips—all meant to get men's minds off the grim reaches of the Nations which they must soon cross on their way to Abilene and the railroad.

Most of the crew, like Spence himself, knew something of the hazards involved in hazing two thousand-odd head of *brasada* longhorns across the strip. Renegade bands roamed that lawless land, hunting for Texas outfits to ambush. This was '68 and the Indian menace could not be overlooked. From a trail boss's point of view there were other problems ahead: locating grass and water, so that Pitchfork beef would not be gaunted down to hide and tallow by the time they hit the railhead in Kansas.

Leaving the remuda corral, Spence headed toward the camp. The herd had reached bedground too late in the afternoon to attempt a river crossing. Ordinarily, about now, Pitchfork's riders would be lifting their bedrolls from the hoodlum wagon and thinking about hitting the hay, bone-tired from the long day in saddle.

But not tonight. Not with the Indian Nations looming on the north horizon. Not with Jumpoff's fleshpots tempting them across a hundred yards of river ford.

TWO RIDERS were splashing across the mud bars to gain the south bank as Spence drew within earshot of the crew tossing their mess gear into Frijole Joe's wreck pan. They were from Jumpoff, obviously; and Spence stiffened. Touts from some gambling dive, most likely, who had spotted Pitchfork's campfire and had forded the Red to drum up business from the Texas drovers.

The riders reached the area of firelight ahead of Spence, and the young herd boss was jolted to see that one of them was a woman whose shoulder-long hair, yellow as burnished brass, caught the cookfire's gleam in a way to speed up a cowhand's pulses. Only one kind of girl could come over from Jumpoff.

"Lining up trade," Spence muttered angrily. "That's the trouble I had a hunch was coming. They don't even wait for Texans to cross the river—they come after 'em."

He heard the mounted man's voice across the night, addressing a question at large to his crew:

"Who's the ramrod here? What outfit?"

Frijole Joe, the rawboned old cook who had been in Colonel Crain's employ since the 'fifties, answered the rider:

"Pitchfork, up from Cotulla. Herd boss is Brad Spence. That's him comin' now."

The gravelly voice of Grote Kaywood reached Spence's ears: "A slick-ear kid holdin' down a man's job, mister. You'll stand ace-high with Spence if you brung him a lollypop to lick."

A round of laughter greeted Kaywood's

sally. The humor stung Spence; he knew the deep-rooted animosity behind Kaywood's joshing remark. Kaywood had been a cavalry major under Stuart during the war; Spence had come back to Texas in '65 with a mere sergeant's chevrons on his gray sleeve. Before that, Grote Kaywood had been Crain's foreman on Pitchfork. By every right of seniority and experience, Kaywood should be trail boss this year. Spence was the first to admit that. But the Colonel had assigned him the job, naming Kaywood as segundo.

The two visitors from across the river reined their horses around as a drover pointed out Spence, walking into range of the firelight. Spence, seeing the woman at closer range, had to revise his first estimate of her. She was no trail-town jezebel; her youth was too freshly wholesome, her beauty too untarnished for that.

The man with her was a mustached oldster wearing a brushpopper jumper, boss-type stetson and apron chaps. He didn't appear to be a gambler or bartender, as had been Spence's first guess. A rancher, maybe, on his way south after finishing his own drive.

"You're the boss of this drive, they tell me," the man greeted Spence. "I'm Fred Irons. Stock inspector working out of Kansas. This is my daughter Judy."

Spence automatically lifted his hat, his face showing his relief. Kansas had set up a quarantine against longhorn herds infected with Texas fever this summer. In that respect Pitchfork had nothing to worry about. So far, cattle from the Nueces thickets were not infected with any virulent disease.

"I'm Brad Spence," the young Texan replied. "Light and put your name in the pot. Reckon the cook can rustle up another steak."

Irons shook his head. "Thanks, but Judy and I have had supper. We're putting up at what passes for a hotel over in Jumpoff. Saw your herd move into bedground this afternoon. Thought I'd mosey across the river to drop a word of advice before your crew hits Jumpoff for the usual spree."

There it was. The spark that would touch off the explosion of trouble Spence had been dreading all day.

SPENCE hesitated, knowing he could not explain his reasons for restricting the men to camp tonight. Last summer, right here at Jumpoff, Grote Kaywood had let his crew visit the town. The next morning half his men were still drunk and the others—including Kaywood—were not even back in camp.

The herd had lost four days, getting across the Red. Spence had the colonel's orders not to let that happen this year. Kaywood's spree had cost Pitchfork dearly, last season; as a result of the Jumpoff spree they had reached railhead after the beef market had broken.

Sucking in a deep breath, Spence said in a voice calculated to include his men, "If you're worrying about my outfit painting the town red tonight, sir, you needn't. I'm holding them in camp so we can start the herd across directly after daylight tomorrow."

His words brought an instant reaction of anger to the men packed around the campfire. Kaywood's throaty voice lifted in a jeer of contempt: "You hear that, amigos? Our last chance to cut the dust of Texas out of our craws with a dram of forty-rod, and the boy wonder who's bossin' us says we got to stick around camp and tend to our knittin'."

"That's what Spence thinks," tittered another voice.

Color stained Spence's cheeks, seeing a troubled frown touch Judy Irons's face. She saw the whole picture of Spence's predicament. A herd boss who couldn't handle his men didn't belong on the Chisholm Trail.

The girl was staring curiously at Spence. He was a well built six-footer, wearing Confederate army pants tucked into high-heeled star boots. His face was deep-rutted from the fatigue of the day's point riding and the inner strain of responsibility which any Chisholm Trail ramrod carried with him to Kansas.

But he was young, too young for such a

job. Spence could almost see Judy Irons's lips framing that thought now, as she averted her eyes from him.

Spence glanced back to Irons, to see the Kansas inspector rubbing his cheek thoughtfully. Irons, too, was sizing up the odds this kid herd boss faced tonight.

"Glad you're holding your men on the Texas side of the Red tonight, son," Fred Irons said, speaking unnaturally loud, as if to add the weight of his authority to Spence's decision. "That's just what I rode down to see you about. That an' to chat with you about the Kansas quarantine act. You're carryin' a vet's certification for your herd, I suppose?"

Spence was having a hard time keeping his eyes off Judy. She was wearing a man's shirt and the play of Frijole Joe's greasewood fire accentuated the modeling of her bosom. To the hungry desires of this trail crew, Judy Irons made a picture to madden a man's blood.

"Why—no, Inspector," Brad stammered. "But we ain't carrying the fever north. You'll get your chance to run an inspection

when we make our crossing tomorrow."

Irons nodded absently. "Fine. I've turned back half a dozen Texas outfits here at the Red so far this summer. Saved 'em the rough haul across the Strip. They couldn't have made it over the Kansas border anyhow." Irons hipped around in saddle. "But I don't do my official work after dark," he said. "The deal is this, Spence. I take it you've heard of Riolette and his bunch?"

MENTION of Stagg Riolette's name brought a hush to the Texans ringing the cookfire. Riolette was a halfbreed from New Orleans who had assembled a gang of misfits from all over the country, retreating to the chaparral jungles of the Indian Nations out of reach of the law.

Last year and the year before that, Riolette's longloopers had made heavy depre-

RICKAREE PETE FRIJOLE JOE STAGG RIOLETTE

dations on Texas cattle outfits moving north. They specialized in wholesale ambuscades, seizing north-bound cattle and driving them deep into the Nations for eventual resale to unscrupulous Eastern buyers at half the prevailing market. The law was powerless to halt the practise.

"I reckon," Brad Spence grinned, "Stagg Riolette's name is known clear to the Rio Grande, Inspector. That's one reason every Pitchfork rider is packin' guns on this drive. We don't aim to lose our herd to any renegade outfit."

Irons's mouth hardened under his sandy waterfall mustache.

"Well," he grunted, "I think you ought to know that Riolette's outfit is camped down-river a few miles from Jumpoff, using the town to spy on Texas outfits headed north."

Before Spence could answer, Grote Kaywood said blusteringly, "Pitchfork's ready for any trouble those rannihans can cook up after we hit the Strip, Irons. *If* we cross the Red into Riolette's territory, that is. Might be you've thrown a scare into our commandin' general tonight, in which case he'll be swingin' us west, I reckon; to stay on Texas graze as far as the Panhandle stretches."

Irons did not look Kaywood's way. He said to Spence, "What I'm tryin' to say, son, is that Stagg Riolette's wild bunch is in Jumpoff tonight, buckin' the tiger and gettin' drunk. They consider any Texan is fair game. That's why I'm glad to know you're not paying Jumpoff a visit tonight. It would be askin' for trouble."

The Kansas inspector, having delivered his message, was now wheeling his horse around to return to the river. Spence said, "I'm much obliged to you, sir. See you *mañana*."

Spence's eyes were on Judy as he spoke and for the first time he saw the tension relax from her face. She gave him the barest of smiles in response to his doffing his stetson, and in the next moment she and her father were melting in the darkness, heading toward the river ford.

For a long moment, a death-quiet hush gripped the Pitchfork camp. Then Grote Kaywood said, "She's gettin' late, boys. We better be saddlin' up if we're goin' to hit the high spots and see what makes Jumpoff tick."

Brad Spence turned slowly to face the big Texan.

"We're staying in camp tonight, Grote," he said flatly. "You heard Irons's warning. Time enough to tangle with Riolette's gunhawks after we've crossed the river with the herd."

A defiant laugh rumbled from Kaywood's beard. "I don't know about you," he chuckled, "but I'm gettin' my boots planted on a brass rail in some Jumpoff saloon tonight."

Hoarse voices made a din in Spence's ears. Rickaree Pete, the cavvy wrangler, had his say: "And I'll be hoistin' a shot glass right along at your elbow, boss."

That summed it up, that word "boss." It didn't matter that Colonel Crain had assigned Brad Spence full authority to get his beef herd to rail this summer. The men were solidly behind Grote Kaywood when the chips were down, and they were down now. This was the showdown that Spence had been dreading, all the way across Texas.

Spence's hands fisted at his sides. Kaywood was facing him across Frijole Joe's supper fire—a behemoth of a man, barrel-chested and warp-legged, his brown face nested in a thicket of curly black whiskers.

A pair of Confederate pistols were holstered for cross-draw at Kaywood's flanks. He carried a bowie in the leg of one cowboot, and around Cotulla Kaywood had a rep for being able to handle that knife. Even the Mexican vaqueros, favoring the blade over the bullet, steered clear of Grote Kaywood when he was stalking Cotulla with a load of liquor in his belly.

Kaywood was stone sober tonight. A week ago, right after pushing the herd across the Brazos, Spence had caught Kaywood sneaking a bottle out of his cantlebags, and had knocked it out of the segundo's hand, smashing it underfoot. Colonel Crain had issued definite orders to

his Pitchfork waddies about carrying whisky on a drive. That day, Spence had fully expected Kaywood to haul a gun on him. But the big man had backed down, that time. The time wasn't ripe for a showdown, not in the heart of the Lone Star country.

THINGS were entirely different tonight. One more river to cross and Pitchfork's trail herd would be out of Texas, starting the Indian Nations leg of its northward trek. Once over the Red there would be no turning back, no hiring of new men. Kaywood knew that. He also knew the crew, practically without exception, was backing his insubordination tonight.

"I'll tell you why I'm keeping you men in camp tonight," Brad Spence said quietly. "It's not only because Riolette's gunnies are in Jumpoff, waiting to pick a fight with the first Texicans they see. It's because we've got two thousand head of cattle to get across the Red tomorrow, and it's a job that can't be done by a crew that's spent a night carousing."

The men were all on their feet now, forming an arena around Kaywood and Spence. Spence felt a churning sensation in his belly—he was boxed in here, one man against twenty. It was not a situation to be met with threats or even a show of guns. He had only one weapon now—an appeal to the crew's loyalty to Crain.

"Every day counts, getting to Abilene," Spence went on. "Lose a couple of days here at the Red, and we might find the beef market blown up in our faces when we get to rail. I can't risk any delays, men. I'm carrying out the colonel's orders—"

Kaywood came around the fire, halting at arm's reach from his young boss. The big segundo growled waspishly, "Carryin' out the colonel's orders—just like this was the army again. That's all you ever were, Brad—a snivelin' non-com, carryin' out the instructions of better men. Well, the crew's waitin' to see who's the better man, you or me. We're pullin' out for Jumpoff as quick as we can saddle up. You goin' to stop us, kid?"

Brad glanced around. Back down now, before all these riders, and he might as well quit the herd and ride back to Pitchfork and admit to Colonel Crain he wasn't man enough to shove a herd up the trail.

"As long as I'm herd boss," Spence panted, "I—"

"You'll what?" Kaywood broke in. "Fire every man who crosses the river tonight? Leave the herd to scatter in the brush? Stand aside, kid. You're blockin' my way to the remuda corral—"

Kaywood lunged forward. Spence started to brace himself, determined to land one blow on the segundo's hairy face before the explosion came. But he was too late.

Rickaree Pete's big arm came around his neck from behind, catching him off balance. Spence fell back, helpless in the cavvy wrangler's strangling grip. He heard Kaywood's brittle laugh, saw the segundo's fist coming at his jaw.

He didn't feel the punch land. It seemed that the sun's light suddenly flashed in the back of his head; he had the sensation of tumbling head over heels into a bottomless void. Bells clanged in his ears. The salt taste of blood was on his tongue. Then he was afloat in nothingness. . . .

A bucket of cold water drenching his head and shoulders brought Brad Spence around. He found himself stretched out on the gumbo alongside Frijole Joe's campfire. It was reduced now to a glowing bed of coals, the only proof he had of a lapse of time.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and lifted a hand to feel his chin. A bloody welt began throbbing as he jerked his fingertips away.

Shaking his head to clear it, Brad Spence stared groggily around. He saw the starlight shining on the murky gray canvas hood of Frijole Joe's chuckwagon. Somewhere far off he thought he heard a coyote yammering. It was followed by a distance-muted jangle of music from some saloon piano across the river.

The Pitchfork camp seemed completely deserted. And then Spence's eyes drew in

focus on his lone companion—Frijole Joe, the ancient white-haired *mestizo* cook. Frijole was standing to one side, a bucket in either hand. One was empty; the other he had brought up from the river, brimming full.

"It's all right, kid," the old cook said gently. "You made your play. All any man could do. They had you outnumbered, that's all."

SPENCE got unsteadily to his feet, his hand going down to the cedar-stocked Colt .45 at his hip. He was grateful for Frijole's comfort; he and the old cook had always hit it off well, though there was a forty-year difference in their ages.

"Crew's followed Grote over to town, Joe?"

Frijole nodded, setting down his buckets.

"The whole damned kaboodle of 'em are explorin' Jumpoff's honkytonks about now, boss. You been out ten-fifteen minutes."

Bitter shame flooded through Spence. It was an empty thing being called boss after what had happened tonight. Kaywood's rebellion had finished him so far as this trail drive was concerned. When the men came back from Jumpoff they would be more unmanageable than ever.

"What do you aim to do, boss? Whatever you say, I'll back you up. If you're worryin' about disappointin' the colonel, I'll tell him just what kind of a stacked deck you were buckin' tonight."

Spence grinned bitterly. He had a wild urge to cut his favorite peg pony out of the string tonight and hightail it south for Cottula and Crain's ranch house. But he wouldn't.

"Why, Joe," Spence said hoarsely, "I can't quit the herd, you know that."

Frijole shrugged. "You got better'n three hundred miles of ground to cover before we hit the loadin' pens at Abilene, boss," the old cook reminded Spence. "If all goes well crossin' the Nations, that's a month."

Spence stooped to pick up his stetson. He swatted the thick dust of the campground off it, smoothed out the crown and set the hat at a jaunty angle across his head.

His head was clearing now and he was thinking straighter.

"You mean that's a long way to go with a crew that ain't pulling together, Joe. You mean I'm not man enough to get the herd through?"

Frijole Joe hunkered down, feeding mesquite chunks to the fire. Without looking up at his boss, the cook murmured, "Didn't say that atall. I think you're twice the man of any buckaroo you got on the payroll, from Grote on down to that yellow-streaked Rickaree Pete."

Spence said, "Thanks, old-timer. Convincin' the crew you're right won't be easy, but it's got to be done. I can't let the colonel down."

Frijole Joe's black eyes sparkled approvingly as he poured a tin cup full of steaming coffee from the pot nested on the coals.

"Colonel Crain picked you to replace Kaywood on this drive," the cook said. "He wouldn't of done that if he hadn't figured you were the right man for the job."

Spence accepted the coffee from the old man and sipped it. The java put a bite in his innards, restored his shaky nerves to something like normal. He was suddenly aware of an enormous change inside himself,

Up to tonight, he had been afraid of his job, afraid of his ability to handle it. That fear was no longer in him. It had taken Kaywood's assault to jar that weak streak out of his system.

"Frijole," Spence asked suddenly, "what's wrong? Why won't the crew work for me like they would work for Kaywood?"

Frijole let a long silence build up, his seamy face thoughtful in the shuttering firelight. Finally he said, "It boils down to one thing, Brad. The men are mostly older than you. They don't think you've won your spurs yet. They don't respect you. An' you can't get cooperation from men who think they're better'n their boss."

Spence tossed his empty cup into the wreck pan and headed off alone into the night.

FRIJOLE JOE was working around the chuckwagon when the young herd boss came back. He was leading a Pitchfork-branded sorrel gelding, saddled and bridled.

Pretending not to notice the horse, Frijole Joe went on thoughtfully, "Another thing. Better'n half of the Pitchfork waddies were buck privates in the war. They hate any soldier who ever wore stripes or a shavetail's bars. They know you fought under Colonel Crain, and followed the colonel back to Pitchfork after Appomattox."

Spence said, "In other words, they think I was named trail boss because I was the colonel's favorite, is that it?"

Frijole Joe grinned. "That's it. You ain't proved yourself, son. You tried to, tonight, but tonight wasn't a fair chance. I tell you it turned me sick at the stomach, seein' Kaywood belt you one when the wrangler was holdin' your arms pinned behind you."

Spence stepped into stirrups, gathering up his reins. His eyes were fixed on the dancing lights of Jumpoff, across the turgid flood of the shallow river.

"Kaywood tipped his hand, punching me when I was in no shape to punch back, Frijole." Spence's voice hardened. "Grote Kaywood showed he's rotten at the core tonight, Frijole."

The cook nodded, busy swabbing out his Dutch oven.

"I've known that about Kaywood for quite a spell of time—before you ever showed up at the Pitchfork, Brad. The colonel knew it, too. Reckon that's why he made you ramrod of this drive—and sent Kaywood along with the crew to test you."

Frijole Joe walked over to where Spence sat his horse.

"The colonel's gettin' up in years," the cook reminded the young Texan. "His arthritis kept him from ridin' with us this summer. He ain't got long, I figure. Strikes me he's picked you to carry on Pitchfork after he's gone. Ordered you out on a damn tough job this summer to prove he had picked the right man for his heir."

Spence fingered his sore jaw, knowing he was lucky that Grote Kaywood's haymaker hadn't fractured the bone.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves with that talk, Joe," he reminded his old friend. "Right now, I got a job to do."

The trail cook squinted up at Spence. "You're fixin to ride out to guard the herd," he said naively. "Forgot to tell you, Brad—our shift of nighthawks are still patrollin' the bedground. Shorty and Blaine and Carruthers and Pollywog. Come midnight and no relief shows up, they'll stick on the job."

Spence shook his head. He gestured northward toward the beckoning lights of Jumpoff town.

"The crew's over yonder whooping it up with Kaywood," Spence said. "I've got to settle the thing that's at the bottom of this—whether I'm man enough to boss 'em, or whether Grote Kaywood rides point the rest of the way to Kansas."

A vague alarm showed in old Frijole Joe's rheumy eyes.

"Wait a minute, son. If you're invadin' the lion's den, I better saddle up an' go along with you."

Spence touched rowels to his sorrel's flanks. "When a man sets out to win his spurs," he called back, "he's got to go it on his own, Frijole. I'll either come back with the crew, or I won't come back at all."

JUMPOFF, the last settlement on the Texas trail between the Red River and the Kansas border, was a scatter of canvas-roofed soddies, frame shacks and shapeless adobes built on a rise of ground on the north bank.

Similar towns had taken root at various points along the Red, wherever the many-pronged segments of the Chisholm Trail crossed out of Texas. Jumpoff had but one reason for existence: to prey on the vices and appetites of the lusty breed of Texas men moving up the trail.

A year ago, with Grote Kaywood as herd boss, Spence had passed through Jumpoff. He knew the general layout of the place. A town in name only, Jumpoff had no recognized law, no official status. Its store buildings were outnumbered ten to one by honkytonks and deadfalls; the only establishment which might survive the in-

evitable decline of cattle shipments overland was the Cherokee House, a two-story frame hotel facing the river on the south edge of the town.

Spurring his sorrel out of the river, Brad Spence's eyes were fixed on the glowing yellow squares of light marking the ground-story lobby windows of the Cherokee House. He was remembering what stock inspector Fred Irons had said tonight: "We're putting up in what passes for a hotel over in Jumpoff."

That meant the Cherokee's House was Judy's temporary home during the height of the trail-drive season when her father was on quarantine inspection duty here at the Red.

It annoyed Spence now, finding his thoughts centering on the inspector's daughter. It was dangerous letting his attention stray from the grim business which had brought him across the river tonight. Tracking down Kaywood and forcing a showdown with the troublemaker would demand every atom of a man's concentration. And yet he found himself thinking of a girl he had met only an hour ago.

Spence didn't doubt that the girl had seen Kaywood leading his crew over the Red River ford half an hour ago. She already had her proof that Spence had not been able to hold his men in line tonight....

Spence's eyes left the Cherokee House and ranged on along the wide single street of the town, a street that ended in a jungle of mesquite and buckbrush and junco thickets. Beyond Jumpoff was the wilderness of the Indian Nations, lair of renegades like Stagg Riolette, roving bands of hostile redskins.

Tar barrels smoked from in front of a dozen saloons and gambling houses. A myriad sound touched Spence's ears, now that he was on the edge of the town. Brassy peals of laughter from percentage girls in a nearby dancehall; the thump of a discordant piano, the rumble of spurred boots in a square dance.

In one of those deadfalls along main street, Kaywood would be starting his overdue binge. The Pitchfork crew was probably scattered from hell to breakfast among Jumpoff's fleshpots by now, but they didn't matter. Rounding up his men must come second to facing Kaywood.

Halting his sorrel at the hotel tie-rack, Brad Spence dismounted and hitched. He would make the rounds of the houses, and sooner or later he would run into Kaywood.

Spence swallowed hard, refusing to admit a rubbery sensation in his knees, a cold ripple of gooseflesh down his back. He had felt like this before, on battlegrounds where he faced Yankee musket fire and saber charges. Well, he was scared tonight, but he had a job cut out for him.

He lifted his gun from holster and checked the loads in the cylinder.

SPENCE braced his shoulders for the ordeal to come, and started along the edge of the street toward the nearest deadfall. He was passing the front steps of the Cherokee House when a girl's voice hailed him from the deep shadows under the hotel's wooden-awninged porch.

"Mr. Spence—wait! Please wait a moment—"

It was Judy's voice. He sensed that, even before he saw the girl move into the fanlike spread of lamplight streaming from the hooked-back doors of the hotel lobby. She was coming down the steps toward him, with Inspector Fred Irons at her heels. They had obviously been sitting on a porch bench, keeping track of riders crossing over from the Texas bank.

Spence lifted his hat clumsily, eyes squinting against the light.

"Evening, Miss Irons," he said, stepping into shadow to prevent the girl from seeing the livid bruise discoloring the tip of his jaw. "Howdy, Inspector."

The girl reached out to touch his sleeve. She was breathing fast and her eyes were wide with anxiety, but at the moment all Brad could think of was that her eyes were the same color as Texas bluebonnets in the spring.

"Mr. Spence—we saw your cowboys ride in a few minutes ago. Dad and I knew

they came without your permission. We—we were hoping you wouldn't cross the river tonight."

Spence's cheeks burned. He saw the red eye of Iron's cheroot glow hard to the suction of his draw, illuminating the craggy features of the Kansas stock inspector.

"If you had trouble with your boys on the Texas side," Irons said gravely, "you can't hope to clear up the difficulty by following them into Jumpoff, Spence. It is not Judy's or my intention to pry into your personal business, but—"

Spence said stiffly, "The things been coming to a boil ever since the herd left the Nueces, Inspector. Like you saw, most of Pitchfork's crew are tough cases. They don't cotton to taking orders from a—a green kid."

Judy's fingers tightened on his arm. "Go back to camp," she urged him. "You'll only run into trouble here. Don't risk it, Mr. Spence. Don't try to stand up against those hoodlums for the sake of your pride."

Spence squared his shoulders. "Time comes when a man has to draw or drag, ma'am," he said grimly. "Kaywood, my segundo, got away with something tonight that has to be settled his way. That's why I'm here."

Inspector Irons cleared his throat. "As man to man, I'm quite sure I understand, better than my daughter would. But I've got to back up what Judy just told you. Bucking this man Kaywood in a saloon brawl isn't the answer."

Spence stared back at the man. "What is, then?"

Irons' shoulders lifted and fell. "There are times when discretion is the better part of valor, son. Go back to camp. Your crew will straggle back eventually—nursing hangovers and black eyes, the last ragtag rannihan of them. They'll be easier to manage after they've worked off their energies in town tonight."

Spence forced himself to grin. "I'm no panty-waist Sunday-school teacher riding herd on my crew's morals, Mr. Irons. I don't begrudge 'em whisky and girl and a few rounds of poker. But I've got two thousand head of beef to keep pushing up the trail. I can't drive cattle with men I can't boss."

After a long pause, Irons put an arm around Judy's waist.

"We've had our say, sweetheart," the old man murmured. "Spence, you'll find your strawboss in the Alamo, yonder."

Judy started to protest, but her father hurried on, "Before you go into the Alamo there is something else you should know. That's where Stagg Riolette's gang of scum have congregated for the evening."

Spence's heart was slugging his ribs as he stared up the street at the adobe saloon, crudely fashioned into a replica of the Texas shrine of liberty in San Antonio. Kerosene flares illuminated a garish red-lettered sign: Alamo Bar.

"I was thinking," Irons went on. "Give Kaywood rope enough and maybe Riolette will trim his plow and save you the trouble. Those renegades like nothing better than to pick a ruckus with a Texan."

Spence gently extricated Judy's hand from his sleeve. He said humbly, "Don't think I'm not grateful for you folks worrying about my hide. And my thanks, sir, for tipping me off where Kaywood is holed up. Saves me the job of bucking the rest of my boys in other barrooms."

HE MOVED AWAY, angling across the street at a long stride, headed for the torch-lighted front of the Alamo. That deadfall, he remembered from last year, was the worst of Jumpoff's sinkholes; one of Colonel Crain's drovers had been shot to death in a poker game in the Alamo, his bones now mouldering in Jumpoff's boothill at the north end of town.

Loosing his sixgun in leather, Spence shouldered through the slatted half-doors of the Alamo, eyes slitted against the shine of a battery of wall lamps behind nickel-plated reflectors.

To his left was a dancefloor, crowded with customers, gay with the red and gold and yellow dresses of percentage girls. Directly facing him was the long mahogany counter of the bar, where half a dozen

aprons were hard pressed to fill orders for the men massed three-deep at the brass rail. The right-hand third of the Alamo was given over to the roulette layout, chuck-a-luck cages, crap games and poker tables.

A painted girl in a low-cut black silk gown slithered up to the handsome young Texan as he put his back to the wall, searching the smoke-filled room for a glimpse of Kaywood's towering shape.

"Like to dance, good-looking? Like to buy Rose a little drink, cowboy?"

He spotted Kaywood then, the Pitchfork man's head and shoulders looming above the press of customers facing the glittering backbar mirror.

"No, thanks." He moved off from the percentage girl, finding himself repelled by her reeking perfume. "Later, maybe."

Steering for Kaywood's broad back, Spence elbowed his way through the milling crowd, past a consumptive-looking swamper who was sprinkling fresh sawdust on the puncheon floor, worming deeper into the jam lining the bar.

In the mirror he saw that Kaywood's face held a high flush, but the man had not yet had time to get thoroughly drunk. At Kaywood's left elbow was the Pitchfork wrangler, Rickaree Pete, hugging a scrawny wench in a tight-fitting sequinned gown.

Pushing in behind his segundo, Spence saw that Kaywood was engaged in conversation with a tall man at his right, a swarthy giant with white teeth gleaming under a wax-tipped mustache. Kaywood's companion stood out in this room, set apart from the other riffraff by his fancy peach-silk shirt and silver-trapped batwing chaps. He wore fancy staghorn-butted Colts at his thighs, too flashy to brand him for a working cowman up the trail from Texas.

Spence heard Kaywood's whisky-thickened voice over the babble of sound in the barroom: "Agree with you, Riolette. See no reason why us Texicans should have any trouble with you boys. Live 'n' let live, thass my motto."

Riolette. The tinhorn in the sporty shirt and the garish chaps was the boss renegade of the Nations. He wondered

vaguely whether Riolette had braced Kaywood, or his strawboss had singled out that owlhooter on purpose?

It didn't matter now. Spence reached out to grip Grote Kaywood's brawny shoulder, bringing the Texan wheeling to face him at point-blank range.

"Got unfinished business with you, Grote," the Pitchfork herd boss said quietly. "Come outside and we'll settle up."

THINKING it over later, Brad Spence wondered what there was about impending trouble that seemed to telegraph itself to other men.

He had spoken barely above a whisper, his words intended for Grote Kaywood's ears alone; but when Kaywood spoke in answer, his words fell into a vacuum of silence:

"Well, here's the boy wonder. Has un-

The converging riders, weapons drawn, were only seconds away

finished business outside, he says. Why, I'm happy to oblige. This is going to start my evenin' off real hilarious-like."

Kaywood emptied his shot glass with a backward snap of his head, tossed the glass on the bar behind him, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Without glancing toward Riolette, the Pitchfork strawboss went on, "Stagg, this here specimen made a name for himself in the War Between the States. Wore a sergeant's stripes before he was seventeen years old. You ought to follow us outside, Riolette. Might get yourself a couple of laughs."

Backing his way toward the saloon doors, Spence was subconsciously aware that an aisle had formed to let him through the throng. This crowd had heard a challenge dropped by Spence, and Kaywood's ready acceptance of that challenge. A fight of some sort was in the offing. Sizing up the two participants, there was no doubt in the mind of any witness as to how that fight would wind up. This husky kid was asking for suicide.

Turning his back on Grote Kaywood, Spence was midway across the barroom when the cadaverous-looking swamper with the box of sawdust hanging by a strap harness from his shoulders fell into step beside him, whispering, "Don't tackle him, kid. Grote Kaywood had a dozen notches in his gunbutt before you were even foaled. Whatever your ruckus with Kaywood is, dodge it while you can."

Spence made no answer. He had the odd sensation of being detached from himself; it was some other person stalking grimly from the door, pulling the crowd with him.

"It's your funeral, kid," the swamper made his last desperate appeal as they reached the batwings. "If it's to be with fists instead of guns, watch out for a knife if Kaywood gets in a corner. I seen him carve out a mulewhacker's liver with a sticker nobody knew he was packin', right here in Jumpoff two years back."

The swamper stepped away as Spence shoved the batwings ahead of him and crossed the saloon porch to descend to the street. The kerosene torches fronting the Alamo's adobe front painted the street's flatness with dancing blood-red light as the young Pitchfork herd boss came to a halt and turned toward the saloon.

Grote Kaywood was coming down the steps, flexing his big hands. At his side was Rickaree Pete, babbling excitedly. Behind Kaywood, the Alamo crowd was spilling out of the doors, caught in the electric tension of the moment. Spence did not recognize Stagg Riolette anywhere in that throng.

Reaching the bottom step of the saloon, Kaywood shoved Rickaree Pete back with a sweep of his left arm. He advanced a few strides to halt in front of the taut-lipped young Texan who stood like a wolf at bay in the center of a fast-forming ring of spurred and booted frontiersmen.

"All right, kid," Grote Kaywood's stentorian voice rumbled over the noise of the forming crowd. "Speak your piece an' let's have at it. Tell the boys why you're pickin' this fight. I'm anxious to get back to my bottle."

Spence waited until the crowd came to a hush. He hoped some of his Pitchfork waddies were on hand to witness this showdown, his answer to challenged authority.

"Why, Grote," Spence began in a level voice, "my piece is easy. Reckon Jumpoff knows I'm prodding the Pitchfork drive this summer instead of you. Everybody knows that but you. If I got to whip you to make it clear, why, I'll do it."

KAYWOOD threw back his head and burst into laughter. He bawled good-naturedly, "You call me away from the bar to brag about soft-soaping the colonel into givin' you my job, kid? It takes more than soft soap to get a Texas herd to Kansas."

Spence waited for the laughter to die.

"I gave orders for the crew to stay south of the river tonight," Spence said. "You brought 'em over to Jumpoff. I aim to show this town who's bossing the Pitchfork drive. That's all."

Kaywood's face sobered. He thrust thumbs under shell belts.

"Kid, you aim to show the town who's bull of the herd, you or me. Okay. How you want your ticket to hell wrote out? Draw at ten yards, winner bury the loser?"

Spence unbuckled his gunbelt, coiled it around his holstered .45 and handed it over to the nearest person, a buckskin-clad plainsman standing in the forefront of the crowd. Through the tail of his eye he saw the Alamo's swamper nodding approvingly.

"We'll settle this thing with our fists, Grote," Spence said, unbuttoning his hickory shirt and peeling it off to let the torchlight play on the ribby musculature of his chest. "You walk away from this fight, you're herd boss the rest of the way to Abilene."

An unholy gleam kindled in Kaywood's eyes as he made a dramatic business of unstrapping his own double gun harness, turning over his Colts to Rickaree Pete. Following Spence's lead, Kaywood removed his own shirt.

Spence shook his head, holding up a hand to check Kaywood's advance.

"You carry a knife in that left bootleg, Grote. Get rid of it."

Kaywood hesitated, then reached below his left knee to pull a ten-inch bowie from a concealed scabbard inside his cowboot. The segundo turned, holding the blade's point between thumb and forefinger, and drove it quivering hilt-deep into the bottom step of the Alamo porch, an inch from the cavvy wrangler's foot.

Kaywood yelled from the depths of his vast chest, and launched himself at Brad Spence with shoulders lowered and jaw outthrust. "Let's start the music, bucko!"

Spence sidestepped Kaywood's opening lunge. He had seen the Pitchfork man fight on more than one occasion, and knew this fight could not turn into a barroom type of brawl or he'd be finished before he started. Kaywood's fighting techniques knew no rules. He would gouge at Spence's eyes, kick him in the belly, stomp him with his spurs if he got his adversary down. When Kaywood fought he expected no quarter and granted none.

Balanced on widespread legs, fists cocked, the Pitchfork trail boss saw Kaywood feint with his left, then follow up with a sledging right uppercut aimed for Spence's weakest point—his jaw, already purpled and bloodied by Kaywood's foul punch earlier this evening.

Spence had expected his chin would be Kaywood's primary target. He fell back, rolling his head from the murderous blow, and before Kaywood could recover his balance Spence laid in a hammering left and right to Kaywood's nose and cheek.

Blood sprayed brightly in the torchlight as Kaywood's nose took on a grotesque crooked angle. Bellowing like a wounded bull, the segundo pounced at Spence, hoping to close in with a rib-crushing clinch and take Spence to the ground for the finish.

Spence gave ground; he had figured out his plan of attack. He had to wear Kaywood down, keep out of his reach, keep the bigger man constantly off balance.

Kaywood had the best of him when it came to weight and reach. What Spence was gambling on was his superior speed and whatever advantage twenty years would give him.

SPENCE veered away toward the saloon, to keep Kaywood from bowling him into the crowd. Kaywood was stalking him now with a frenzied intensity of purpose, trying to get Spence within range of his lethal fists.

Spence's spike heels caught in a deep wheel rut and he went down on one knee. He heard the long gasp of the crowd as Kaywood drove in, aiming a kick at the younger man's shoulder. But Spence was rolling away and bouncing to his feet, landing an uppercut to Kaywood's left eye before he got into the clear.

Thus far, Spence did not have a mark on him. That fact maddened Kaywood, turned him reckless. He came in roaring, launching himself at Spence's midriff. His great hands clawed at Spence as he landed on all

fours, wide open for a kick in the face. Never before had Kaywood tackled such an elusive target, always an inch beyond the reach of his fists, slippery as quicksilver.

Kaywood's great hands clawed deep into the dust of the street. At that moment Spence was facing the torchlight of the saloon front and was partially blinded by that glare; he didn't guess Kaywood's trick until the segundo was hurling a double handful of dirt straight at Spence's face.

The fine alkali dust caught Spence in both eyes. Panic stabbed through him as he fell back, momentarily blinded. He felt himself falling, his own backward leap carrying him off balance; and then Kaywood was on top of him, both hands driving for his neck, thumbs cocked over his throat, and ready to probe for his windpipe.

He smelled the sweat and blood and whisky fumes of the hairy face directly over his. Kaywood's huge legs bracketed his torso, pinning Spence's elbows to the dirt. He was at Kaywood's mercy now, back to the ground, arms helpless, the segundo's spikelike fingers on his throat.

He felt the big thumbs thrusting into his flesh, probing for the windpipe. Blackness swirled around Brad Spence, his senses slipping. Kaywood aimed to strangle him to death here on the dirt of Jumpoff's street.

Then, without apparent reason, Kaywood's grip left his neck, the crushing weight left his stomach and chest. Spence opened his dust-clogged eyes to see Kaywood rising to his feet, backing off before some menace out of range of Spence's eyes.

A familiar voice sounded above the tomtomming of blood in Spence's head:

"No Injun tricks, Kaywood. The kid challenged you to a finish fight, a fair fight. I aim to see it carried through that way."

Spence got dazedly to his feet and glanced over his shoulder. Fred Irons was standing out in the middle of the arena, a sixgun pointing at Grote Kaywood.

Rickaree Pete's outraged yell challenged the Kansas stock inspector: "Stop buttin' into something that's none of your business, Irons! Spence badgered the boss into this fight. Let 'em settle it their own way!"

Without taking his eyes off the grinning Kaywood, Fred Irons answered the cavvy wrangler on the saloon steps: "It will be settled Spence's way. Take your time, kid. Get your eyes working before I pouch this gun."

Spence pulled air to the pit of his lungs. Six feet away, Grote Kaywood stood in an attitude of patient amusement, massive muscle-slabbed arms folded over his chest, waiting.

Spence rubbed his throat, felt the stickiness of blood where Kaywood's horny nails had cut his skin. His tears had washed his eyes clean now; his heart was steadying down.

HE MADE a gesture toward Kaywood and saw Fred Irons holster his gun, moving back to join the crowd. Spence had signaled his readiness for the brawl to resume. Kaywood, believing he had the advantage and eager to press it for all it was worth, came stalking in at a boxer's crouch, zigzagging craftily as he measured his opponent for the finishing punch.

Spence blocked Kaywood's opening haymaker, wind jolting from his lungs to the hammer-blow of knuckles grazing off his shoulder. This time Spence did not fall back; he landed another solid blow to Kaywood's left eye and for a moment the crowd forgot its frenzied excitement as it saw the mismatched pair stand toe to toe in a slugging match.

Outreached, Spence had to withdraw. He lowered his arms, shaking his head in a puzzled fashion, his facial muscles slack.

Out of nowhere came an onlooker's shout, "You got him, Grote. He's ripe for the pluckin'!"

Kaywood was grinning again. The big segundo was beginning to tire; at forty-one Kaywood didn't have the stamina of his best days. But he knew the signs Spence was showing now, the dog-tiredness of a man who had fought his best and was now at the end of his rope.

Spence heard Fred Irons's voice in the clamor about him, calling on him to get his arms up or admit he was finished. But Brad Spence was still fighting with his head. He had planned how this should be and knew the gamble he was taking. If it paid off—

His knees wobbled as Kaywood's left hand clamped itself like a vise on his right shoulder. Kaywood was hauling back his right fist for the Sunday punch to end this brawl, his eyes fixed on Spence's damaged jaw.

Poised in that stance, Kaywood was caught off guard. He felt Spence's body shift position, dropping out from under the clutching hand and pulling Kaywood down and forward with that motion.

Too late, Kaywood saw Spence's right arm coming up and under his own defenses. The impact of Spence's fist meeting Kaywood's whiskered jaw had the flat, meaty sound of a pole-ax hitting a steer's skull.

Kaywood's head jerked back to the swiveling power of that punch, delivered with the weight of Spence's springy body behind it. The segundo's legs went out from under him as Spence's follow-up punch with his left finished the job of knocking the bigger man flat on his back.

For a long moment, Spence stood in a crouch over Kaywood's fallen shape. Kaywood's eyes were wide open, reflecting the glare of the saloon torches. His mouth was open; there was no intelligence in Kaywood's stare. He was knocked cold. He was down to stay.

Slowly, Spence straightened up. His eyes met Fred Irons's and caught the inspector's triumphant look. This thing was finished. Out of nowhere, with blinding surprise, a man who was seemingly dead on his feet had rallied like an exploding bomb to deliver a one-two that would have felled an ox.

Very slowly, Spence's eyes traveled along the ragged row of unbelieving faces until they came to rest on Rickaree Pete. The cavvy man was staring at his friend lying motionless at Spence's feet, unable to believe this could have happened.

"Rickaree!" Spence barked. "Come over here!"

THE WRANGLER snapped himself out of his trance. He stared sullenly at Spence for a moment, and then, dropping Kaywood's gear into the dust, walked slowly over to where Spence waited.

"Rickaree," the Pitchfork herd boss said quietly, "I'm kicking you to hell off my payroll. But first you've got a job to attend to. Understand?"

Rickaree licked his lips. He was thinking, in this moment, of what had happened across the river tonight when he had tackled Spence from the rear, holding him while Kaywood landed his punch.

"Brad," the wrangler panted lamely, "I'm ready to apologize. I backed the wrong man. I—I want to stay on with the outfit."

Brad Spence ignored the wrangler's abrupt change of loyalty. "I want you to make the rounds of the honkytonks here in Jumpoff," he said coldly, "and round up every last man on the crew. Tell them to be back in camp by the time the circle riders are to be relieved at midnight."

Rickaree Pete nodded mutely. When Spence had called him over, the wrangler had fully expected to be knocked into the middle of next week. This cold-voiced order was harder medicine to swallow here in public than physical punishment would have been. Rickaree started to turn away, but Spence grabbed his arm.

"You're taking Kaywood on the rounds with you, Pete. He'll need help getting back to camp. You've set yourself up as Kaywood's sidekick. You'll see that he gets back without falling into the river and drowning."

The cavvy wrangler could only stare at his feet. He whispered meekly, "You're the boss, Brad."

"Yeah," Spence said. "You remembered that a mite late, Pete."

Spence turned to find the stranger who was holding his shirt and holster belt. The buckskinner said, "It was a beaut of a fight,

son. Reckon this slick-ear hit it on the nose when he said you're the boss."

As Spence was buttoning up his shirt and strapping on his gun harness he saw a white-jacketed man from the Alamo cross the street to dump the contents of a water-bucket over Grote Kaywood's stirring form.

Rickaree Pete was kneeling alongside Kaywood now, a hand on the big man's shoulder.

Fred Irons came alongside Spence and took the trail boss by the arm.

"Come over to the hotel with me, Brad," the inspector urged gently. "You took more punishment than you realize. We got to get you cleaned up and a slug of whisky in you before your high streak wears off and you realize how stove up you are."

Spence was glad to turn away from the spectacle of Grote Kaywood being lifted out of the dirt. It took the combined efforts of Rickaree Pete and the saloon bouncer to get Kaywood on his feet again.

Strangers who had been calling for Spence's blood were trooping around him now, wanting to buy him drinks, to shake his hand. Spence ignored these overtures.

The fine-honed edge of Spence's nerve was wearing off now. He was just beginning to realize that every bone and muscle in his body seemed to be on fire. That slugging match had cost him more than he knew.

FRED IRONS pushed Spence through the outskirts of the crowd, got him out of range of the Alamo's flickering lights. Spence's pulses leaped as he saw Judy Irons detach herself from the shadowy porch of a store building and come running toward them.

"Judy saw the whole shebang, perched up on a porch rail yonder," Irons chuckled. "She let out a bellow like a hamstrung calf when Kaywood got astraddle of you."

Belatedly, Spence mumbled his gratitude: "You saved my bacon, Inspector. Grote like to broke my neck as it was."

Judy called his name, and in the next instant she was clinging to him, her golden head pushed against his chest under the hard angle of his jaw. Spence's arms came up, pulling her close for a brief moment; then he let her go.

Somehow, in this moment, the only thing that counted was knowing that Fred Irons's lovely daughter had seen him vindicate himself.

"You fool, you!" Judy Irons choked out, backing away from him. "You had to settle things the only way a man like Kaywood could understand."

Brad Spence swallowed hard. Judy had been crying! His winning this brawl had mattered to her, then. The thought came to him that tomorrow he would be leaving Jumpoff with the herd and more than likely would never see her again. But tonight, her cheek was moist with tears she had shed for him.

"You're hurt, Brad," the girl said, lifting a fingertip to touch a welt on his cheekbone. "Come over to the Cherokee House and Dad and I will clean you up."

The Irons linked their arms through Brad Spence's and together they made their way into the lobby of the hotel and up a flight of creaky steps to a room on the south front corner of the building.

A door opened on an upper story gallery and through it Spence had a glimpse of Rickaree Pete tipping a whisky bottle against Grote Kaywood's lips, Kaywood's back propped against a porch post.

"You've made a mortal enemy in that man," Fred Irons commented, pulling open a dresser drawer and taking out a bottle of brandy. "That's the trouble with these barroom fights. They never settle anything. Now Kaywood will be laying for you, waiting to shoot you where your galluses cross."

Spence sat down on the brass four-poster bed and watched Judy, working with swift efficiency, pour water into a china bowl and dip a turkish towel into the liquid.

"Disagree with you, Inspector," the herd boss said, taking the brandy glass from Irons. "I don't think I'll have any more trouble with Kaywood. I have a hunch he'll call for his time tomorrow. He couldn't stand working for Pitchfork after what happened tonight."

Judy was swabbing the dirt and blood off his face and neck with the sopping towel. Spence took a deep swig of the brandy, feeling the hot bite of it in the pit of his stomach. Fred Irons hovered around, getting in the way, while his daughter applied an iodine swab to the numerous cuts and welts on Spence's face and knuckles.

"I saw Stagg Riolette in the Alamo," Spence said suddenly. "He and Kaywood were having a round of drinks when I got there."

He saw gravity settle on the stock inspector's face.

"That's bad news, son," he said bluntly. "Riolette had his reasons for singling out a Pitchfork man to drink with. Do you know what I think was back of that pair getting together?"

Spence shrugged. "Like attracting like, I'd say. Grote Kaywood has a renegade streak in him."

Fred Irons paced the floor as nervously as a caged animal.

"I think," the Kansas stock inspector said, "Riolette was sounding out your strawboss about how things stood with the Pitchfork crew. I think Riolette's spies have picked out your herd for an ambush once you get into the Nations, Spence."

Spence thought that over. "That could very well be, sir. Riolette certainly wasn't trying to pick a quarrel with Kaywood when I saw them."

IRONS made his way out onto the gallery, and for the first time Spence found himself alone with Judy. She had finished the task of erasing the marks of battle from the young Texan; she was suddenly shy in his presence, busying herself with wringing out the blood-stained towel and emptying the water basin into a slop jar.

"I didn't know a Yankee could be so obliging, ma'am," Brad chuckled.

The girl pretended to be adjusting the wick of the oil lamp on the bedside stand.

"You fought under the Southern Cross," she said. "The first moment I saw you, over on the south bank of the river tonight, I noticed your gray trousers. I—I guess that's why you roused my interest, Brad. That, and knowing you were up against a hard situation with your crew."

Spence said, "You are a Yankee girl, aren't you?"

Judy Irons shook her head. "The Irons were a divided family in the Civil War, Brad. Dad was an infantry captain under Sheridan. I had a brother on your side. He was killed at Yellow Tavern—wearing a uniform like yours. No. I was a Rebel like you, Brad."

It was on the tip of Spence's tongue to mention that he had taken part in the defense of Richmond under Jeb Stuart in '64. But if Fred Irons had fought with General Sheridan, there was every chance that he and Judy's father had swapped bullets that bloody day at Yellow Tavern.

"We're from Missouri, you see," Judy went on. "Our family was so mixed up when the war started. Dad's brother owned slaves. Dad was among the first to volunteer for the Union. Brother fighting brother . . ."

Spence stepped into stirrups

Spence came to his feet, flexing his sore muscles. He sensed that time was fast running out for him and Judy Irons. They had offered him hospitality, and Spence really owed his life to Fred Irons tonight; but there was no excuse for him to tarry any longer in this room.

Iron's voice from the outdoor gallery disturbed the run of Spence's thoughts. There was a strange excitement in the stock inspector's words as he called: "Come out here and feast your eyes on something, Spence. Hurry it up."

Spence and Judy Irons were in time to see a group of mounted cowboys passing the Cherokee House, heading for the muddy ramp of the Red River ford.

It took Spence a moment to recognize those shapes passing the hotel. Then he spotted the Pitchfork brand on Rickaree Pete's white gelding.

"Your crew—heading back to camp," Irons said. "The puncher who was siding Kaywood at the fight has rounded them up. You're to be congratulated, son."

Spence blinked the moisture rising in his eyes. It was true. His rebellious drovers were heading back to join Frijole Joe at the Pitchfork camp, breaking off their spree in Jumpoff. For Spence, this was his ultimate triumph.

Watching his riders splash out into the river shallows, Spence suddenly thought of something.

"I spotted Rickaree Pete riding the *blanco*. Did you notice if Kaywood was with 'em?"

Iron's eyes held a strange look as he met Spence's glance.

"It was too dark to make out individual faces," he said evasively. "But as you say, Kaywood has probably had enough of Pitchfork. You're well rid of the man, I should think. Especially since you don't appear to be short-handed on this drive."

Spence's eyes swung northward and came to rest on the garish front of the Alamo saloon.

The Pitchfork boss said, "I want to thank you and Miss Judy—for everything. Reckon you'll be on hand to inspect the herd after the crossing tomorrow, sir?"

Irons turned and held out a calloused hand. "There's a holding ground downriver from Jumpoff," the stock inspector said.

Judy followed Brad Spence into the hotel room and opened the hallway door for him.

"You're thinking that Kaywood didn't go back to camp with the rest of your crew," she said frankly. "Brad—promise me you won't tangle with that ape again tonight?"

Spence grinned, but the humor did not reach his eyes.

"I've just got to know where Kaywood stands," he said. "If the man isn't going to make the rest of the drive with me I've got to know what's in his mind. I don't want him stalking my backtrack across the strip."

He left her then, heading down the lobby stairs and out onto the street. Whatever exhilaration his victory over Kaywood had brought him was submerged now in a backwash of anticlimax, a sense that his troubles were only beginning.

THE AREA in front of the Alamo was deserted now. From the barroom came a bedlam of revelry, at the same high peak it had been when Spence had first entered the saloon hunting Kaywood.

Pulling his stetson brim down to shadow his face, Spence entered the batwings and almost at once located Kaywood. His segundo was seated at a poker table near the wall on Spence's right. He was not playing cards; he was drinking in the company of half a dozen gun-hung strangers.

Threading his way through the scattered gaming tables to approach Kaywood, Spence had his worst fears confirmed when he recognized the man seated nearest Kaywood. It was Stagg Riolette, his back to Spence. The two were engaged in earnest conversation.

Kaywood had not seen him yet. His face was livid with bruises and one eye was a swollen purple blob, sealed shut.

As Spence came to a halt directly behind Riolette's chair, a beaver-toothed renegade in a gaudy plaid shirt spotted the Texan and spoke across the table to Kaywood: "Company, amigo."

Grote Kaywood jerked around in his chair, his mouth twisting in surprise as he recognized Spence. Then he settled back, an ugly sarcasm ringing his voice as he greeted his herd boss:

"So . . . the boy wonder is makin' bedcheck. Figure I'm AWOL, Sergeant?"

Knots of muscle swelled at the hinges of Spence's jaw.

"Didn't Pete tell you to rattle your hocks back to camp with the rest of the men, Grote?"

Kaywood tilted his chair back from the poker table. Stagg Riolette swung half around, his face inscrutable as he watched the byplay between the two Pitchforkers.

"Why, our wrangler friend said such was your wish, Sergeant," Kaywood drawled. "Haul up a chair and have a drink. Let bygones be bygones, eh?"

"I'm riding back to camp in five minutes, Grote," Spence said. "Get your horse and come along. Let bygones be bygones, yes. That's the way I expect it to be."

Kaywood flashed an enigmatic look at Stagg Riolette. He drummed the baize-coverd table with his fingernails.

"Sorry, kid," Kaywood said finally, "but Pitchfork will have to get along without my services. Give the colonel my regards when you get back to the home spread. I'm pullin' out here at Jumpoff."

Spence was silent a moment. These grinning hardcases ringing the poker table were members of Riolette's ambush crew, he realized. Grote Kaywood was joining the longloopers who preyed on northbound trail herds crossing the Nations.

"Drop by the holding ground on this side of the Red in the morning, then," Spence said. "Frijole Joe will give you a voucher for the pay you've got coming."

It was Stagg Riolette who answered for Kaywood.

"Sure, boss. Kaywood will see you *mañana*. Or the day after. He'll collect his wages before you hit Kansas, anyway."

For a long moment, Spence stood staring at Kaywood, fully understanding the significance of Riolette's cryptic words. He said, "I'm warning you, Grote—don't crowd me. Lay off Pitchfork."

Kaywood turned back to his companions and picked up his bottle.

"On your way, Sergeant. That unfinished business of yours—we didn't settle it. I'll see you. Outside. North, someplace."

Spence turned on his heel and stalked his way grimly out of the smoke-fouled saloon. He felt a cold rime of sweat on his skin as he headed back toward the Cherokee House hitchrack where he had left his horse an eternity ago.

JUDY'S ROOM on the upper corner of the hotel was dark when Spence reached his sorrel at the rack. He was glad for that. Somehow, he didn't want to face the girl again so soon.

He had won his spurs in the eyes of his crew, yes. But that was an empty goal, considering that licking the segundo had driven Kaywood over to the enemy.

Their next meeting was as inevitable as tomorrow's sunrise—the final round in his feud with Kaywood was still ahead of him. And at a time and place of Kaywood's choosing, not his. Kaywood had the initiative. When he failed to turn up at camp tomorrow, the crew would quickly guess what had become of him. The whole drive might break up as a result of that, before Colonel Crain's beef was even out of Texas.

He was tightening his saddle girth and loosing the reins from the chewed cottonwood bar when he saw the glow of a cigar coming down the hotel steps and out toward him. Fred Irons's low-voiced question came from the murk:

"You located Kaywood and Riolette hobnobbin' like old friends, didn't you?"

Spence nodded. "Yeah. Kaywood's thrown in with the renegade bunch. All the same as told me they'd picked my herd to grab off somewhere along the trail north."

The fragrance of Irons's cigar wafted around Spence. The inspector said heavily, "Only way to avoid tangling with Riolette, son—swing north and west to the Panhandle. That way, you'll only have the Oklahoma panhandle to cross into Kansas, south of Fort Dodge."

Spence had an answer to that.

"It won't do, Inspector. My boss and I talked that over. Hitting Kansas above the Texas Panhandle would mean an extra couple of weeks on the trail. We'd hit Abilene after the peak of the market. No,

Fred. I'm going straight north, Riolette or no. I've got the crew back of me now. We'll make it."

Spence stepped into saddle and curvetted his sorrel out into the street. He said awkwardly, "You got a mighty fine daughter, sir. I'll not forget her very soon, if you'll forgive a stranger for getting personal."

The glow of Irons's cigar revealed a grin lurking under his mustache.

"Judy's just turned nineteen," he said. "She's got a look in her eye I've never seen before. She'd murder me for even hinting this, Brad, but I got a feeling my girl considers you anything but the stranger you claim to be. If you talk to her tomorrow, don't say anything you don't mean. I wouldn't want to see Judy hurt."

A wild excitement went through Spence. What was Fred Irons trying to tell him about Judy?

He said in confusion, "Good night, sir. See you tomorrow."

He put the sorrel down the muddy slope into the river, crossed to the south bank and off-saddled to turn his horse into the remuda corral. Across the night he could hear the crooning voices of his night riders patrolling the bedground. It was a comforting sound, for he recognized those voices and knew they belonged to men who an hour ago had been whooping it up in Jumpoff's deadfalls.

Reaching the hoodlum wagon, Spence hauled down his bedroll. The crew had turned in; he could hear the measured snoring of cowpunchers off through the darkness.

SPENCE was spreading his soogans and preparing to shuck his boots when he heard a shuffling sound and saw old Frijole Joe approaching in his sock feet from his bed under the chuckwagon.

"Brad?" came the cook's tentative whisper.

"Yeah," Spence said. "You heard what happened over in town, I guess."

Frijole Joe hunkered down alongside his herd boss.

"Scraps an' pieces of it. You showed Kaywood who's ramroddin' this shebang. That sobered down the boys, I grant you that."

Brad sucked in a deep breath. He hated to break his bad news to the old *mestizo*, knowing what a shock it would be.

"Joe, Kaywood won't be back."

The cook grunted. "Didn't expect he would be."

"Worse than that. He's spreading his soogans in Stagg Riolette's camp from her on out. You know what that means."

Frijole Joe gave vent to a startled oath. "The hell! It means we got Riolette's drygulchers ahead of us."

Spence crawled into his covers, wadding up his saddle blanket for a pillow.

"We had Riolette ahead of us anyway. I don't mind so much now, knowing I got the crew backing me."

Frijole Joe was silent for so long that Spence propped himself up on one elbow, staring at the cook's silhouette under the stars.

"They *will* back me, won't they, Joe? I won my spurs tonight, didn't I?"

The cook shifted position. "Yes and no, kid. You whipped Kaywood; but do you know why the boys come back to camp?"

A premonition of disaster took shape in Spence. "Why, I sent Rickaree Pete on the rounds of the saloons, roundin' 'em up. With my orders to get back across the river pronto."

Frijole Joe nodded. "Sure. But it was Grote Kaywood's order that knocked 'em into line, Brad. Hate like hell to tell you this and ruin your sleep. The crew come back to camp because Kaywood told 'em to, not on your orders."

Discouragement went through Spence in sick waves. He could not doubt old Frijole's word about this. He was back where he started, with nothing to show for this night's work.

"I'm not predictin' how the boys' temper will be after breakfast tomorrow," the cook went on. "Maybe they'll rebel at takin' the herd into Riolette's territory. Maybe not. No way to tell which way the cat's goin' to jump."

Frijole Joe left him with that, heading back to his blankets under the chuckwagon. Brad Spence stretched out on his tarp, staring at the myriad star clusters in the midnight sky, trying to ease the intolerable tension that tied his nerves into knots.

Tomorrow would tell the story, when he gave the order to start shoving the herd off bedground into the Red. Either Spence would find himself with two thousand head of cattle and no crew to drive them north . . . or the men would accept his orders.

He drifted off to sleep without knowing it, sheer fatigue counterbalancing the wild disorder in his head.

THE CLANG of Frijole Joe's triangle summoning the drovers to breakfast roused Spence out of dreamless slumber. He hauled on his boots and gunbelts, rolled his blankets and tossed them in the hoodlum wagon. He made his way down to the river to wash up and came back to join the men at breakfast.

The scarlet break of the dawn revealed the tense, rutted faces of the men. Rickaree Pete was among them, avoiding Spence's eye. The men were devouring their food in moody silence, waiting for something to break the tension.

"We're bunching the crew in the flats east of Jumpoff this morning, boys," Spence said finally. "Quarantine inspection by the Kansas official who visited camp last night. We ought to have the herd strung out north before noon."

Kiowi Sims, at sixty-five the oldest of Colonel Crain's cowhands, sauntered over to the coffee pot to refill his tin cup. Every eye was on Sims, hearing him clear his throat, knowing he was to be their spokesman.

"I dunno, boss." Simms spoke with a diffident respect, showing Spence a deference quite apart from his attitude on the trail across Texas these past weeks. "After what happened last night, I reckon we're past challenging your authority. But we're still free men."

Spence's jaw hardened. "Of course you're free men," he snapped. "What are you driving at, Kiowa?"

The puncher eyed the trail boss over the rim of his steaming cup.

"Rickaree says Kaywood has joined up with Stagg Riolette's gunslammers, boss."

Spence nodded. "That's right. Grote told me that last night, after you boys left Jumpoff."

When Simms did not speak, Rickaree Pete broke the silence.

"What Kiowa meant by us being free men, boss—we're tryin' to make up our minds whether to draw our time or commit suicide by shovin' the herd into Riolette's country. We signed on to see the Colonel's beef into the yards at Abilene, but we didn't count on havin' to buck Riolette's guns."

Brad Spence let his glance run around the circle of squatting cowpunchers. Their mutinous impulses of yesterday had been erased, that was obvious; but fear of ambush attack was holding them back now. Yesterday, crossing the Nations had been a gamble. This morning, every man in the Pitchfork crew knew Riolette's renegades were across the Red, waiting for Colonel Crain's herd to be delivered into their hands.

"I had a good look at Riolette's gunhands in the Alamo last night," Spence said. "A shifty-eyed, gutless gang of cowards, the whole lot of them. I'd lay odds on Pitchfork cleaning up Riolette's outfit any day of the week, men."

But flattery made no impression now. Kiowa Simms demurred. "It doesn't take bravery to shoot a man from ambush, Brad. Why not face up to the truth? Kaywood's convinced Riolette that he can grab our herd any time he takes a notion to. Personally, I don't want to risk my hide. If the colonel was here, he'd think the same."

Spence walked over to the wreckpan and tossed his tinware into it. It was touch and go now.

"Men," Spence said, turning to face the crew, "all I ask of you is not to go off half-cocked. We'll lay over a day, hold the herd where it is. Right now, I'm taking a pasear over to Jumpoff. I've got a

plan cooking; if it works, we can shove the herd into the Nations tomorrow without worryin' about what Stagg Riolette might do."

Men stared at each other in amazement. What was their young trail boss hinting at—a personal showdown with the renegade chief? But an idiot would have more sense than to try that.

They watched Brad Spence saddle a dun from his personal string and head for the river ford, not looking back. Rickaree Pete drawled thoughtfully, "He's hankering to visit Irons's girl. That's the big attraction in Jumpoff—not Riolette."

Frijole Joe murmured worriedly, "I wonder. I wonder what that kid is up to."

JUMPOFF looked entirely different by day. Its street was almost deserted, except for a few saloon swampers sweeping off porches. Birds made music in the tamarisks and willowbrake of the Red River bottom; the air was cloyed with the perfume of flowering agarita and wild rose. Even the town's buildings, shabby and unpainted though they were, had lost their sinister look in the morning light.

Spence reined in at the Cherokee House rack and before he could hitch he saw Fred Irons and Judy emerging from the lobby doors. They could see the sprawling russet-brown blot of the big Pitchfork herd scattered out to graze on the Texas side of the river; they could see Pitchfork's crew gathered around the chuckwagon and knew the men had no intention of shoving the herd across the river this morning.

Judy was prettier than a new red wagon, by daylight. He wondered how she would look if the worry left her eyes, and the tension faded from her cheeks.

"You're not moving across today, son?" Irons put the question in a stern voice.

Spence said, "Riolette's got my crew boogered. They know the minute we're into the Nations they'll be facing a bushwhack trap. Can't say as I blame them."

Something like relief touched Judy's face. She said, "Then you'll be swinging northwest and up the Panhandle? That's the only sensible thing, Brad."

Spence said patiently, having been over this alternative many times, "The boss I'm working for doesn't want me to drive the herd the three hundred extra miles we'd be up against. He hesitated. "Miss Judy," he said lamely, "I'd like a word alone with your dad."

The girl's anxiety sharpened. She started to speak, thought better of it, and then turned and made her way back to the hotel porch, out of earshot.

"What's on your mind, son?" Irons asked warily.

Spence came closer to the old stock inspector. "Last night when you visited the camp, you said Riolette's outfit was camped down-river. Just where are they, sir?"

Irons hesitated a moment. "Why are you asking?"

"I aim to dab my loop on Riolette, Fred. The man's wanted by the law in both Texas and Kansas. I aim to haul him north on this drive—as a hostage to guarantee that his rustlers won't attack the herd."

The color drained from the oldster's face.

"Great heavens, Brad, you can't be serious! Kidnaping the kingpin rustler of the Indian Nations—"

Spence hitched his belt impatiently. "It can be done. It's got to be done. If you don't tell me where I can locate Riolette's camp, I'll have to find out in town."

Irons rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Well, you can't miss it. He's camped in where the second creek east of town flows into the Red. But he's got a big crew with him, Brad—fifteen or twenty gunslingers. Right now they're probably sleeping off last night's binge. And Kaywood will be with 'em. You wouldn't have a chance."

Spence grinned without mirth. "Once, in the Civil War," he said, "I sneaked into a Yankee camp past armed sentry lines, and kidnapped a lieutenant colonel—wearing my Rebel uniform. You wouldn't say Riolette's riffraff were tougher to buck than Union troops, would you?"

Without giving Irons a chance to comment, Spence stepped back to the hitch-rail, untied his horse and mounted.

He saw Judy start down the hotel steps after him, and he tried to etch on his memory the picture she made, the morning sun bright on her shoulder-length blonde hair; he lifted his hand in farewell salute and roweled the dun into a gallop.

DOWN THE LENGTH of Jumpoff's main street the Pitchfork herd boss let the dun run at top speed; he didn't rein down until the street tapered off into a game trail threading through the tangle of jungle-thick chaparral. Half a mile out of Jumpoff, Spence picked up a side trail leading east and followed it until he crossed the first of the two tributary creeks which Irons had mentioned. Here the trail petered out, and he set his sights on a knob of high ground due east and headed toward it, threading through the rank mesquite and paloverde growth.

He estimated he had covered another mile of ground before his horse broke through a hedge of tamarisk and dwarf willow and lowered its head to drink at a sluggish stream. Not more than a mile down this creek, its waters emptied into the Red; at that point Stagg Riolette and his rustler crew were camped, spying on the Texas cattle outfits moving into the Nations.

They had already picked the Pitchfork herd for their next haul, which meant that Riolette would be in no hurry to break camp. Putting himself in the boss rustler's place, Spence judged that the rustlers would wait for Colonel Crain's herd to cross the Red and then follow them for a few days, deeper into the recesses of the Nations. Undoubtedly Riolette had already planned where the attack would take place.

Crossing the creek, Brad Spence put his horse down a bank trail, noting the southbound hoofprints of a large body of horsemen. The sign was less than a week old, he judged; Riolette's cavalcade of longloopers had traveled this way, probably, on their way to the Red.

He let the horse pick its own gait, moving steadily downstream. The soft earth cushioned the sound of his dun's hoofbeats. In any event, Riolette would not be expecting trouble from the north; it was doubtful if the outlaw boss posted sentries around his camp, but it was something Spence had to bear in mind.

When he believed he was midway to the Red, Spence ground-hitched his dun and climbed a rise of earth on the west side of the creek, to gain a vantage point to look over the surrounding country and get his bearings.

From that elevation, he looked out over the gray-green ocean of wilderness. Due south, where the heavy cottonwood verdure traced the serpentine line of the Red River, he saw a thin wisp of smoke lifting into the sky and deduced that that marked Riolette's camp.

Further west, almost abreast of him, other smoke gave the location of Jumpoff town. Intervening brush cut off his view of Pitchfork's herd grazing on the Texas side of the river.

Having oriented himself, the Pitchfork herd boss returned to his horse. This time he did not mount. Instead he off-saddled the dun and put it on picket in a patch of lush grass out of sight of the creek.

Then, electing to leave his unwieldly rifle in its saddleboot, he checked the loads in his .45s and headed on down the trail afoot, moving with infinite caution as he neared the northern reaches of Riolette's camp.

The sluicing babble of the creek, flowing over a rocky bed, obliterated any sounds Spence might make on his stealthy approach to the outlaws' location. The odor of campfire smoke was in his nostrils now; any turn of the trail might bring him in sight of the river and Riolette's men.

Gun palmed, Spence made his way around a half-circle bend of the creek—and froze stockstill when he caught sight of a man seated on the bank directly ahead of him.

A rifle lay at the man's side; he had a willow switch fishing pole clamped between his updrawn knees, the line extending into a side pool of the stream. A cigarette smouldered between the man's lips.

The plaid shirt identified him as the hombre with the beaver teeth who was at the poker table with Kaywood last night.

Spence came into the open. The outlaw did not move; his back was braced against a mossy rock and he appeared to be dozing.

A DOZEN FEET separated Spence from the Riolette man when a cruising bumblebee settled on the man's sombrero brim and snapped him out of his doze. The guard muttered a startled curse and jerked off his hat to swat at the insect—when he found himself staring into the black bore of Brad Spence's leveled Colt.

"Don't reach for a gun," the Pitchfork man said quietly. "And don't make a sound, if you want to live to grow up with the country."

The outlaw came to his feet, face gray with shock and anger. He was toting two big-handled revolvers thrust through the waistband of his flaring batwing chaps, but he kept his hooked fingers well away from those weapons.

"How crazy can a Texican get?" growled the sentry, finding his voice at last. "Trigger that smokepole an' you'll draw a whole hornet's nest onto you. Camp's only a hundred yards down the crick."

Spence came in at a crouch, taking no chances here.

"Get your arms up and turn your back to me, bucko."

The outlaw's arms jerked aloft. Fear was beginning to dawn in his eyes as he turned to face the direction of the camp.

Pouncing in, Spence drove his sixgun barrel in a clubbing arc to the guard's skull. The man fell headlong on the pebbly rim of the creek, a slow ooze of blood beginning to gutter through his unkempt hair.

For a moment, Spence stood staring down at the man; there would be no warning from this direction. He moved on past the fallen sentry, keeping close to the creek until he had rounded a tangle of willow and salt cedar. There he sank down on his knees, staring at the glitter of the sun tracking the broad, silt-browned surface of the Red River.

Directly ahead of him, a small remuda of saddle stock were on picket, grazing beside the creek. A wagon road led away to the right, following the bank of the Red River toward Jumpoff. An acre or more of open ground was dotted with stumps, telling the Pitchfork man that this patch of stunted timber had supplied Jumpoff with building timbers and firewood.

He saw the smoke of a smouldering cookfire beyond the grazing horses. A lone man was seated on a stump near the fire, engaged in cleaning a sixgun.

Spence's pulses raced as he recognized that man by the glitter of sunlight on the silver tie-conchas of his chaps. Stagg Riolette himself . . . and he was alone. He wondered where Kaywood and the rest of the crew were.

A sudden shout of laughter answered that for Spence, diverting his eyes further to the southeast. There he saw about a dozen men sunning themselves on a sandy beach, all of them stripped naked. Others were swimming in a backwash of the river.

Here was luck beyond Spence's wildest dreams. The rustler crew—and Kaywood was presumably in their number—were enjoying a cooling swim in the Red, while their boss remained in camp.

But it would be foolish to cross that fifty yards of open stump ground separating him from Riolette. There was no gully to crawl along until he was within effective sixgun range of the rustler, and no brush or rocks big enough to conceal his approach.

Whatever he did must be done quickly, before the crew came back to camp. Turning, Spence made his way back to the unconscious guard.

Working quickly, Spence divested the outlaw of his chocolate-brown chaps. Then, rolling the insensible man away from the creek's edge, Spence unbuttoned his plaid shirt and put it on over his own. The disguise should be an effective suit of armor.

Making his way back through the hedge of willow, Spence stepped boldly into the

open. Riolette's crew, even if they saw him, would not be alarmed.

Heading for the spot where Stagg Riolette was warming himself in the morning sun, Spence had covered half the distance to the outlaw boss when the morning stillness was rudely breached by a gunshot.

THE PITCHFORK man felt a sick sensation as he heard the bawling shout behind him. The man he had knocked out had recovered consciousness and was giving the alarm. A rifle slug whistled past Spence's ear as the guard opened fire. He dropped flat, seeing Stagg Riolette leap off his stump and wheel around, facing north.

Twenty yards away, Riolette saw a plaid-shirted figure sprawled behind a cottonwood stump, training the muzzle of a cocked .45 in his direction.

"Come walking this way, Riolette!" Spence called, wincing as one of the sentry's .30-30 slugs kicked dirt over his outstretched legs. "Tell that son to stop shooting or I'll smoke you down!"

Riolette's sixguns were useless, dismantled for cleaning. The rustler boss of the Indian Nations had recognized the interloper now, and had sized up his own danger.

Waving his arms in a frantic signal to his sentinel at the north end of camp, Riolette yelled his orders: "Stop shootin', Hartley! Hold your fire, damn you!"

The gunfire from the willow thicket broke off. Hartley's shout reached Spence's ears: "It's that Pitchfork kid, boss! He swiped my clothes—"

Spence wriggled around to put a larger stump between him and Hartley. With his left hand he beckoned Riolette to start walking. The outlaw boss complied, his face bleached with fear as he headed closer to Spence's waiting gun.

The swimmers down on the beach had congregated in a bunch now, roused from their sport by the steady thunder of Hartley's gun. Several of them were frantically scrambling into their clothes. Among them Spence recognized the beefy shape of Pitchfork's erstwhile strawboss, Grote Kaywood. Those men were too far away to know the meaning of the gunfire, but they could see their boss with his arms reaching skyward, walking slowly toward a stranger covering Riolette with a gun.

Spence waited until Riolette's shadow fell across him before coming to his feet. Riolette was in Hartley's line of fire now; Spence could gamble on that factor holding the sentry's trigger.

But Hartley was blockading the north trail, up which Spence had left his horse. The wagon road leading west along the Red was undoubtedly guarded by another lookout. And any moment would see Kaywood and the other rustlers heading for camp to investigate.

"What's the idea, kid?" Stagg Riolette asked, forcing a grin as the Pitchfork herd boss checked him swiftly for other weapons. "The only good your comin' to my camp can do you is to agree to turn your herd over to me peaceable—"

Spence looked around. He dared not head his prisoner into the nearest chaparral; too much chance of Riolette's men signaling in the guards posted around the camp.

"As long as you're sticking close to me," Spence panted, "there won't be any shooting. Those men coming from the river yonder—head 'em off. Let 'em know your life ain't worth a plugged peseta if they come any closer."

Riolette turned around casually to face his incoming crew. Most of the men were wearing only their pants and boots, but they were toting guns. Kaywood, in the forefront of the body of men, had picked up a rifle.

"I got fourteen men coming yonder," Riolette said. "They already got you in rifle range, and every one of 'em is a crack shot. You got yourself in a tight, boy, and for no reason that I can figure."

Spence saw what he was looking for now—a jumble of rocks on the far side of the horses' grazing ground. A spot to fort up, but nothing more. Escaping from this open camp with Riolette as his prisoner was im-

possible. Once into the chaparral, Kaywood and the others could surround them.

"Head for those rocks," Spence ordered, prodding Riolette in the ribs with his Colt barrel. "Shag it up. I don't like standing in the open this way."

RIOLETTE shrugged his shoulders and headed toward the grazing horses. Over in the willows to the north, Spence had a fleeting glimpse of Hartley, the sun glinting off his rifle. The guard was sizing up his chances of dropping the intruder without hitting his boss.

Close at Riolette's heels, Spence prodded the man into a jogtrot. Over to the right, the interrupted swimmers had gathered in a group, still a good hundred yards away. The rustler gang, without a commander, didn't know where to turn.

They had reached the boulder patch now. Spence moved to the center of it, to the highest ground, and ordered Riolette to hunker down, out of sight of his men. Spence's gun commanded a clear view on all sides, but he was counting most on Riolette's value as a hostage to keep the rustlers at bay.

"You drew a blank, tryin' to use me for a shield, kid." Riolette spoke with a dull acceptance of defeat now, no trace of his former arrogance in him. "You're countin' on the boys letting you leave camp, in return for my hide. Well, you guessed wrong. What happens to me won't matter a damn to that wild bunch."

Before Spence had time to think that over he caught sight of Hartley sprinting along the west rim of the camp, aiming to rejoin the others. For a moment he lined his gunsights on the running figure of the sentry he had clubbed, but he held his fire, afraid that he might run out of ammunition before he could afford to. He cursed himself for not having brought along the Springfield.

Spence demanded, "Can't you count on the loyalty of your own men?"

Riolette, hunkered down behind a boulder, was slowly shaping himself a cigarette. He had the attitude of a man who knew he had played out his string and was waiting for the end.

"Loyalty among thieves? Don't josh with me at a time like this, Spence. I've ramrodded this bunch because no man among 'em can beat my draw. Now that they know I'm hamstrung, they'd as soon pick me off as they would you, before another hour's gone. How long do you think you can hold out in this rock pile?"

Spence reared to his knees, sizing up what was happening outside. The group of swimmers had moved around closer to the campfire site now; they were arguing excitedly among themselves. The loudest voice, Spence was appalled to hear, was that of Grote Kaywood.

"You see, son?" Riolette grinned, licking his quirly and feeling in a pocket of his fancy vest for a match. "Already the boys are gathering around a new leader. Kaywood's honing to fill my boots. I knew that last night, when he was telling me how easy it would be to grab off your longhorns."

Spence said dully, "But you let him join you."

Firing his smoke, Riolette said, "I built up my bunch by accepting volunteers. How else? Kaywood's a tough man. He's got a grudge against Pitchfork, against you. I can't pay off unless I pick Texas outfits to—"

A gunshot from the direction of camp made Riolette break off; a bullet ricocheted from the rock behind which they were crouched and screamed off into the blue.

ON THE HEELS of that crashing report came Grote Kaywood's stentorian bellow: "I'm takin' over, Riolette. We got a bargain to make with you. Stand up and listen."

Riolette's lips held a malevolent grin as he saw Spence's face stiffen.

"I crossed the river this morning," Spence admitted grimly, "with the idea of grabbing you as a hostage on the trail across the Nations, Riolette. I figured you were all that held them rustlers together."

Stagg Riolette let smoke fork from his

nostrils. He spread his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"It might have worked if your man Kaywood hadn't set himself up as a hero in the gang's eyes. Your lickin' Kaywood last night didn't count for anything. They figure Fred Irons saved your bacon after Kaywood had you beat."

Another gunshot broke the brooding quiet. From the direction of the campfire came Grote Kaywood's bellow: "Here's our proposition, over there. Riolette can save his bacon by coming out an' agreeing to take orders from me. Spence, you can hoof it back to Pitchfork—and tell your crew we're takin' over the herd even if we have to grab it on Texas soil."

Spence risked another look over the rim of the boulder. A chill touched him briefly as he saw that Kaywood was standing alone by the campfire now, out of sixgun range.

Kaywood had been a field grade officer in the Confederate cavalry; now he was employing his new troops with a professional soldier's skill. The bulk of Riolette's former henchmen were busy saddling up horses; others were running to form a ring around this boulder patch. "We'll hang and rattle, Grote!" Spence shouted back.

Kaywood's bearded head nodded, accepting the defiance of his challenge.

"Okay, Sergeant!" he called. "We're smokin' you two out of there, and then we're crossin' the river to lock horns with your yellow-livered crew. This is going to be a big day on the Red."

Spence hunkered back on his bootheels, fingering his reserve sixgun. A smothering silence settled down. By now, mounted rustlers were riding under Kaywood's orders to put these rocks under a circle of guns. In all likelihood Kaywood would give the order for a mass charge from all directions, knowing the two bayed men would have to show themselves in order to open fire. And then a hail of converging lead would cut them down.

Spence would not accept the fact that he faced certain death. He thought of Judy Irons, and banished the vision of her from his mind. When she learned that he was dead she would write him out of her memory as a brash kid who had blundered into a death trap, trying to be a hero.

When the waiting became intolerable, Spence risked another look over the crown of the rocky parapet. Someone had saddled the Pitchfork horse for Kaywood now. Like a field general, he was riding along the perimeter of his ring of guns, checking the renegades he had spaced at regular intervals around the bayed pair in the rocks.

And now Kaywood was ready. Spence saw the segundo lift his hand, alerting his men for the signal to charge.

"They're making their play any second now," Brad Spence said quietly, turning toward Riolette. He hesitated, then jerked his extra sixgun from leather and handed it butt foremost to the faintly smiling outlaw. "Five loads in that iron, Riolette. Make 'em count."

Riolette nodded, twirling the cylinder

[Turn page]

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with a practiced thumb. "I'll tally four," he said coolly. "Luck, kid. And thanks."

Spence saw Grote Kaywood's lifted arm suddenly drop, like a saber stroke. Instantly the circle of waiting outlaws, afoot and in saddle, began screaming like Comanches, driving forward swiftly.

THE MORNING QUIET was smashed by a drumroll of exploding guns. Crisscrossing lead whined over the heads of Spence and Riolette as they braced themselves.

Spence picked out Kaywood, pounding in through the dust. He aimed and fired and saw Kaywood's horse go down, saw Kaywood kick himself free of the stirrups and land running, his shouts lost above the roaring of guns and hoofs.

At Spence's back, Stagg Riolette was steadying his sixgun across a rock, picking his targets carefully. Kaywood was invisible behind the churning dust; Spence singled out the buck-toothed face of Hartley zigzagging in on foot, centered his sights on the man's naked chest and squeezed off his shot. He saw Hartley go down, to be trampled by the oncoming hoofs of one of his own henchmen.

The converging riders were only seconds away from overwhelming the rocky area. Spence held his fire, hoping that he would survive to cut down Grote Kaywood.

Close behind him he heard Riolette fire the last cartridge left in his gun. Spence turned, intending to hand the outlaw extra ammunition from his belt loops. Then, indistinctly through the dust, he saw that the renegade was sprawled headlong over the boulder, a bullet hole in his temple. The outlaw had saved his last slug to cheat his traitorous crew of one victim.

Outside the area of boulders, the shooting seemed to have doubled in intensity, but by some miracle no rider had yet broken through the thick wall of dust.

Unable to find a target for his smoking gun, knowing he was alone now against impossible odds, Brad Spence saw the dim shapes of renegade riders wheeling away from their quarry, spurring in retreat toward the chaparral.

It was impossible—and yet it was happening. Kaywood's attack was breaking up at the last moment. Then Kaywood's misty shape emerging from the dust, vaulting the outer row of boulders, his head jerking as he hunted out Spence.

The two faced each other at point-blank range then, while all around them the sound of gunfire increased in volume. Spence saw Kaywood's jaw working, his mouth screaming curses through his dirty beard; and then they were shooting.

Spence saw the puff of dust leap from Kaywood's shirt as his slug, the last shell left in his Colt, caught the segundo in the heart. Falling, Kaywood triggered his gun twice more, but his lead went wild.

As the sound of gunfire withdrew into the distance, Brad Spence heard a voice shouting his name. A girl's voice . . . Judy Irons' voice.

HE TURNED to see her riding up from the direction of the river. A vagrant breeze was lifting the curtain of dust behind Judy, and Brad Spence knew the reason why Kaywood's renegades had suddenly broken off the attack.

Out across the stump-dotted clearing, Pitchfork's cowhands were hammering in pursuit of the fast-disappearing remnants of Riolette's band. Judy and her father had crossed the river to let the Pitchfork crew know their boss was attempting to invade Riolette's camp. And Pitchfork's loyalty had rallied behind their herd boss when the chips were down. . . .

Spence was scrambling out of the rocks now, away from Riolette's corpse. He was vaguely aware of seeing Frijole Joe and Fred Irons and Rickaree Pete riding back.

Judy Irons flung herself from her stirrups; in the next moment she was in Brad's arms.

"How lucky can a man be?" Brad Spence asked dazedly, his stubbled jaw against the girl's golden head. "I don't mean the crew riding over to help me—I mean finding you, Judy."

Fred Irons and Frijole Joe were dismounting close by Rickaree Pete grabbing their reins. The grin on the wrangler's

face told Spence that the cavvy man knew he was still on the Pitchfork payroll.

"It happened pretty fast, Brad," he heard Judy say. "I guess I knew you were the only man for me when I heard you lay down the law to your men, knowing you were outnumbered."

Spence let go of Judy. He turned to see old Kiowa Simms limping up, a smoking gun in his fist.

"Kiowa," Spence said, "I'm naming you straw boss to take Grote's place. Get the boys together. We've got a couple thousand head of Texas beef to get across the river before sundown."

Simms grinned toothlessly. "Sure, boss. We only lost the morning. But it was worth it, clearing our way to the Kansas line. Reckon what's left of Riolette's gang won't stop running till they fall off the ends of the earth."

Spence turned to Fred Irons. "I'll be coming back from Abilene in five or six weeks, Fred," he grinned. "I'd sort of like to have you and Judy go back to Texas with me, this fall."

The old stock inspector shrugged.

"We'll be in Jumpoff when you get back," he said. "Me, I'll be heading for Abilene myself when the trail season's over. But I reckon you won't have any trouble talking Judy into going back to Pitchfork with you. She worked too hard catching you, son. It was Judy who rounded up your cowpokes and led 'em here; I just come along for the ride."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What did the old-time trail drivers call most of the area now occupied by the counties of Cimarron, Texas, and Beaver in the Panhandle of Oklahoma?

2. What, besides a brand, is a running W?

3. Scenic Palo Duro Canyon, famous home site of the old-time Charles Goodnight Ranch, is in the Panhandle of what state?

4. One type of saddletree is called the Visalia tree because first designed by a saddlemaker in Visalia, in what state?

5. The Canadian Rockies lie more or less along the boundary between what two Canadian Provinces?

6. If you had heard an old-time Northwestern cowboy say he had a job "makin' shavetails," what would he have meant?

7. The Salt or Salt Basin "War" of the Old West kept the air gun-smoky for a while in the western part of what state?

8. A radio reporter surprised a lot of cowfolks by pronouncing "remuda" ree-MUD-uh. How should it be pronounced?

9. Can you distinguish between a wickiup, a hogan, a tipi (or teepee) and a jacal?

10. The Rio Grande (REE-oh GRAHN-day) dampens its banks in what three states and one foreign country?

—Rattlesnake Robert

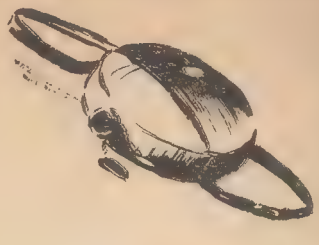
You will find the answers to these questions on page 128. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

THE LONG

WHEN A DESPERATE MAN has reached the point of murder, he doesn't kill in self-defense

He held her tightly for a moment, saying nothing

DRY-UP



By Alice Macdonald

RACHEL HODEN knew all about hate. She knew it was a fire that left a man squeezed dry as the curled-up grass on the burned hills; she knew it because she had watched Jim, as she watched him now.

Hearing the squeal and rattle of the wagon, then the surly grumblings to the team beside the feed stack, she had known it was Jim coming. She put the sourdough batch away in the cooler, and went to stand on the doorsill of the kitchen lean-to.

She saw him jab with the pitchfork, turn and twist it into the hay, as if the stack were all their troubles, debts, lost hopes—and more. Saw him jab the pitchfork in, and leave it there, handle vibrating. Sweat drenched his black hair, trickled down the dusty creases of his face, glued the denim shirt to his back.

The bawling of the cattle came to her as they pawed at the dry, caked bottoms of the water tanks. They plodded up to the house fence, sides gaunted like empty umbrella ribs.

"Jim!" She went out into the yard, already feeling the vise of the heat. Later, Jim would pump water, but it wouldn't be enough. It was never enough. "Let them in, Jim. Open the gate!"

But Jim didn't think of the cattle any more, she knew, didn't think of the price of hay, or even about train. Fists on his lean hips, he looked east towards Ford's place.

It was close. You looked out every morning, and there was the single glimmer of light, from Ford's slack-boarded buildings. And Ford's cattle ambling down to the bright sheet of Ford's waterhole. Ford's cattle were sleek-sided. Ford pitched hay, like Jim, but he hadn't had to sacrifice his herds for lack of water. So that now he could well afford to feed well—and wait out the drought.

The figure coming out to Ford's water corral was tiny, crawling slowly at this distance. She saw Jim's shoulders tense, the fists hard on his hips, his mouth stiffly moving.

"Let the cattle have the house reservoir," she pleaded.

He turned, like a man caught in a dream, looking at her as if they were strangers. "And how long do you think that would last?" His voice was like stones grating together. He sleeved sweat from his forehead and stared across the dead graze at Ford's place.

"Sure, there's water," he said hoarsely. "Plenty of it. For him and for us, both."

"Don't talk like that, Jim. It doesn't do any good."

"I know what would do some good." He spat, and the spittle raised a tiny puff of dust. Then he yanked the pitchfork out of the stack, and went on filling the wagon. His muscles rippled under the tautness of his shirt. His arms swung furiously back and forth, as if pitching hay were a fight and a race.

"Jim, perhaps if you asked in a friendly way—"

"Asked? Asked what?" His arms never stopped their rhythmic swinging.

"Just because you've quarreled doesn't mean—doesn't mean . . . Jim, you were friends once."

"Friends?" It was a hollowed-out sound, above the soft swish of the hay. And under that, the monotonous, dead undertone of the cattle bawling. The sound of them filled her ears.

"Jim, if we used the house reservoir for the cattle, how long would it last?"

"Two days, maybe three." As if they were words memorized. "In a week, I'll be pumping mud in the house well. After that, we move out. Any more questions?"

SHE SHIELDED her eyes against the sun and looked at him, trying to find some softness, some crack in the hard surface where words might enter in. She felt the turn and heave of her stomach. The heat sickened her, and she knew why. But what would have pleased Jim a year ago was now only another burden. She never spoke of the baby coming, only to tell him about it when she knew, for sure.

"Rain may come before then." She voiced a forlorn hope that Jim didn't bother to answer. Overhead, fat clouds held down the heat. They might carry rain, or they might not; it didn't matter. They would pass over, and more would come. If rain fell anywhere in this parched land, it fell somewhere else.

"Jim, you never really asked to use his waterhole. I mean, not out, directly."

"He's got eyes."

"Yes, I know. But if you were nice about it. If you said you were sorry you'd quarreled, and—"

The stark hatred on his face struck her like a blow until she remembered it was not meant for her. His arms stopped their violent motion. "Yeah. You'd like me to do that, wouldn't you. Crawl . . ."

"Just to make up, to be friends again?"

But he was no longer listening.

This was Jim. Every hour, every day, the hate eating out his soul. He wasn't like the man she had married. Feeding stock in summer—when green-up time should have come months ago with plenty of graze for the cattle, when it should have come last year, too, but hadn't. Pitching hay, and looking at Ford's place, at Ford's waterhole with its never-failing spring.

Going back to the house Rachel heard the squeak, squeak of the wagon wheels, ungreased these many long months. Jim fed the cattle, rationing carefully. He pumped water, doling it out. The rest of the time he idled from the house to the barn, on the worn path, sat on the steps, looking east. A man driven by a high wind, doing what was essential, leaving the rest uncared for, undone.

Rachel swept the floor of the new-blown dust. She scraped it out from the corners with her fingernails, feeling breathless and heavy. Leaning on her broom, she looked out the window to Ford's house, a white square in the distance.

Now she saw the house as she had seen it for the first time, on her wedding day, driving out to the ranch, smelling the creosote smell of the raw land. The white frame house had belonged to Jim and to Lew Ford. They were partners. She had looked forward to doing for it, making it hers and theirs, a home.

But they drove past ,and the house stood silent behind them. Lew Ford hadn't come to their wedding; he didn't come out now to welcome her, not even to wave a friendly hand. She turned questioningly to Jim.

"Surprise, honey." He grinned down at her, that large, red-faced grin, his eyes a

blue crinkle. "You don't have to live in that old house. What a break for you, after two men have been messing it up for years." He waved a hand across the valley, and she saw the new house, a mile or more away. "Ours. Lew and me decided to split up the ranch, run it separate from now on. Of course, we'll roundup together, anything else that two can do better than one."

It was a deep surprise to her. Ford without Jim was almost unthinkable. In his forties, Ford was like a father to Jim. He had stopped Jim's wandering feet when Jim was hardly more than a kid, unkinked all the woolly ideas. Later, they had bought the ranch together.

"You haven't quarreled?" she asked anxiously. "Everything's all right?"

"Oh . . . sure." But the grin faded. "Lew will come around all right in time. You'll just have to get used to Lew. Crochety old devil." He grinned again, yet it seemed to Rachel that she saw the wrong turn that things were taking.

LEW FORD wasn't a man women liked —not that Ford cared what they thought. He did without women, scorned them. A dirty old man, rough and hearty, telling his dirty stories, snickering. He stayed away. She baked pies and stews, and sent them to him. He sent back the empty plates, via Jim, with never a word of thanks.

But men loved him. She saw him now in the vacant lot beside Studeman's, pacing off a square to wrestle in. It was like a cock fight, the men betting. He wrestled any comer, no holds barred, all in fun. Sometimes Jim wrestled him, but that was no fight. They matched evenly. Ford was like an old bull, giving up only slowly.

Then with the first baby, there came a change. Ford boasted like a grandfather, wasting his money on presents for the baby, holding it, nuzzling his leathered face in the baby's soft neck. When it died a month later, he grieved in the only way he knew how—a wild spree at Studeman's. But he blamed Rachel for the baby's death.

That might have been the beginning. Jim never said. All she knew was that he stopped going over to pass the time of day with Ford. And with the baby dead, Ford didn't come near them again. After a while, when she felt she could, she sent him a cake. It came back.

And so, without any open break, they drifted apart. Perhaps it was only natural. Jim worked hard, and his herd grew, the scrub stock weeded out year by year, the hills reseeded with each spring rain until they shone like green glass. There was work enough, day up and day down, and gradually she forgot the grave behind the house.

Then, one year, there was no rain. Jim grew grimmer, graver with each week of it. They waited. The water sank lower in the earthen tanks, until finally Jim went over to see Ford about sharing up the waterhole. Only when he came home later, face drained of all expression, did she know what had happened. In her mind, she went with him over the browning graze, over the slope of the hill to Ford's house.

Ford was in the barn, shoeing up the mare.

"Hey, Lew, you old crow. Come out of there! Man to see you."

Ford came out, carrying a hammer. His rusted hair bristled like an Airedale's. He was unshaven, as usual. "Busy," he grunted. They had scarcely met since last fall's roundup.

"The hell you are." Jim climbed down. "Where's all our water?"

"*Our* water!" Ford pointed with his chin at Jim's half of the ranch. "There's your water. Mine's here."

There were words, then, the loud, violent words of angry men.

"You took your half. You never said nothin' about the waterhole. You overgrazed, and now you come cryin' to me. Weed out stock, then come back. We'll talk."

Jim's lips shook as he told her about it. "I went in to town to look up the papers. He's right. Our boundary cuts just this side of the waterhole." His fist clenched

until the knuckles stood out in white ridges. "We've been crooked, Rachel. A shabby, rotten, dirty deal."

Jim's cattle were sold to a falling market, because others, too, were in trouble. Only the strongest he kept. Ford held on. He sold a few head now and then to pay his feed bill, and waited for the scarcity that follows a glut. It came, and Ford cleaned up. The water from the spring scracely dropped. His cattle grew fat. Jim's were bony, worthless scarecrows. And Jim's credit was stretched as thin as his cattle.

Worse than that, Jim kept a gun. Daily she watched it, as Jim changed, as the path wore down between house and barn and Jim looked east. Ford owned no hand gun. Once a drunk had come gunning for Ford, and Ford had riddled him with a blast of his shotgun. The fear grew in her, and now there was the baby to think of.

"JIM," Rachel asked that night at supper. "Couldn't we go somewhere? We haven't seen the Baylors in months. Melissa can't get out. She's expecting any day now."

She bit her lip, remembering too late that Jim disliked the mention of a baby, even someone else's. He went on eating methodically, with the same steady motions with which he pitched hay.

"It—it would do you good, Jim. We're losing touch with friends. Or if you don't want to do that, we could go in to town."

"Celebrate?" He looked up, his chin hunched over the plate.

She tried a different tack. "Well, there's a few things I want in town."

He shrugged. "Go ahead. Who's stopping you?"

"I don't like to go alone. If you'd come with me, Jim . . ."

"Show off your pretty clothes?" His glance angled up and down the worn, faded cotton of her dress.

The food turned dry in her mouth. Losing the ranch, they might start over somewhere else. That she could stand. This she couldn't. As love fed upon the object of its desire, so did hate. But it didn't die when the object was left behind. And like love, it was a spreading force, tingeing with its own color whatever it touched, and making all things seem hateful.

"Come with me, Jim. Just this once?"

He got up, kicking the chair aside, wiping his mouth with his wrist. "You want to go around parading your hard luck, showing off what you got hitched to?"

Her mouth opened. She felt the heat in her face, but no words came.

"I'll tell you what. You like to gad around so much, take the team and go into town. I'm about fed with your complaints, anyhow."

"Jim . . ." It was a bare whisper of sound. She wouldn't quarrel with him.

He got a toothpick from the table, idled towards the door. "If I'd stayed single, I'd of made out. My mistake. Yours, too."

"Jim, that's enough." Her voice was unsteadily low. In spite of her resolve, she said it.

He stared at her and shrugged again. "Look at all the smart boys you could have married. They'd have read over a deed before signing away a water-hole."

"Stop needling yourself, and me."

"Yeah. I know. Everything's my fault."

He glanced out the window, perhaps catching a glimpse of Ford lighting his lamp. Did Jim hate her, too? No, he couldn't. It was only his hatred of Ford made it seem so. Or did he, really?

Jim said, "Well, got to pitch more hay for morning. Use it up before the water's all gone. Choke their gullets, even if they can't drink."

"You don't need to. Leave it till morning."

He went out, slamming the door.

She washed dishes, and scalded herself before she realized the water was too hot. She looked at the spots of grease on the surface, and retched. The other time, she hadn't felt like this. What on earth was the matter with her? She knew. It was her wretched fear. In exact ratio as his love for Ford had been, so was Jim's hate. He might turn on her, too.

THE SUN went down, draining off a little of the heat, and it would have been peaceful, except for the sick, thirsty bawling of the cattle. She went out, seeing Jim lean against the feed stack, recklessly smoking a cigarette. It was a woman's way, to talk things out, perhaps foolish, but what else could she do?

"Jim, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

He didn't look at her.

She sighed. "You can't hurt anyone but yourself, acting this way all the time."

He turned then, flinging down his cigarette, and suddenly he laughed. "That's an idea. I've thought of it myself, lots of times. But now we've got it all together in one place—you and me thinking the same thing."

He left the team where it stood, and went over to the corral, whistling up the big bay, saddling. His arms made jerky, angry movements, slapping on the blanket, yanking the horse's head around for the bridle.

Watching him, Rachel felt the first prickles of terror, as he let the reins trail in the dust of the yard, as he strode into the house.

He came out, wearing his gun.

"Jim!" He didn't hear her, didn't care. Her voice was a faint protest, lost in the bottomless pit of her terror and his hate.

"No, Jim! No!"

His eyes looked straight ahead of him, glazed and empty, as he strode for the horse. His spurs raked the dust. His legs made long, slow swings; he was an arrow set on its course; he was hate and vengeance. He was lost.

She ran after him, choking on the dust, stumbling, clutching his arm. He shook her off. "Jim, not that! Not that, Jim! You know that wasn't what I meant."

His lips were sealed together. She could have counted the creases on his forehead, could have put her finger in the pinched-up furrow of his mouth.

"Please, Jim! Leave your gun at home. Tell him you'll pay for the water, anything—"

"Pay with what!"

She ran in front of him, seized both his arms. He stopped. "You've got to listen to me, Jim. Later, later, when times are better, you can pay him. Tell him that."

"Time is past for talking."

His eyes glinted in the dying sun, caught her reflection, lost it as he tried to move aside. She grasped him tightly. Time was past. There was a time for sweat and toil under the sun, for all the back-breaking years of it. Time for hoping, for counting the slow gain.

Then time ran out in two searing summers, leaving a man like an empty sack with only this hate to keep life in him. But time went on, second by dry second. The cattle bawled. They caught the stillness like a big hand, and shook it.

"Jim, you can't! It would be murder. You'd hang for it! Or if Ford, if he—" Her breath caught in her throat, twisted it. Jim with a pistol! Jim, no match for Ford's shotgun. Or if by some miracle, some luck, he killed Ford . . .

Her fingers dug into his arms. He pried them loose, one by one, and thrust her

aside. His foot jabbed at the stirrup then.

"Jim! Think of me. What will I do if you're killed?"

"Marry some other guy."

She flung herself against the horse, and it shied away, Jim losing his step. She felt giddy. The earth was turning . . . Then suddenly she lay on the cot in the living-room. Jim was bathing her face, rubbing her wrists.

"You poor kid . . . Are you all right, Rachel?"

RACHEL nodded faintly. There was wretchedness in his eyes, and more, the helpless look of man before the mysterious nature of a woman. It was ridiculous, yet her strength was in her weakness. She had never used it until now. Now she must seize the moment, before reaction, and the commonplace, set in. It was a vile, underhanded trick.

Her hand went to his gun, and she looked and asked, without speaking. Slowly he unbuckled the gunbelt and let it drop to the floor.

"You promise?"

He nodded, but another expression had come into his eyes, as if he suspected the whole thing of being an act. Yet doubt made him promise.

"I'm going over anyway, Rachel. But," he added tenderly, almost like his old self, "you mustn't worry. I'll be reasonable. Maybe I've been a fool, letting things go like this. I'll make one effort. God knows, we can't lose . . ." Her heart contracted, remembering other days with Jim.

He got up wearily, put on his hat, and stopped with his hand on the door. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I didn't mean to—"

She shook her head and smiled, but guilt was a hot wave inside her. Jim had his fierce pride, and she had trodden upon it, lessened it, by using her fainting as a weapon. She had tied him to her, and that made him feel less a man. Now he was going with hat in hand to beg, and that wasn't Jim. He was doing it for her, for the baby.

She hung the gun back on its peg, and went to the door to watch him go. He rode out, his head bowed on his chest. God willing, he would get water, and they would keep the ranch. But at what price?

Now, at least, he accepted the fact of the baby. No longer struggled against the thin thread that distracted him from his hatred, held him from the object of it. She and the baby had been that thread, she knew, and now they were a rope that tied him down. What price was a man's pride?

Her glance followed him up the slope of the hill, and then she closed the door and lit the lamp in the room. Would Ford make it easy for Jim? She prayed he would. But easy or hard, Jim would never forget this.

The minutes dragged on into an hour, and still she sat, hands gripping the brass-bound arms of the rocker. Now she would go look out the window. No, not yet. Let him not come home and see her anxiously peering out. Another drag on him, reminding him of his lost pride.

She sat, holding the stillness to her, clutching it as if for comfort, and listened. Cattle bawled on the seared hills. There was nothing else. She got up, went to the window, looked out, shielding her face with her hands against the lamplight. She strained to see Ford's lamp in the distance, but all was blackness.

What had happened? she wondered, panic-stricken. If things had turned out well, they would have gone into the house, Ford taking down his bottle, the two of them having a drink. She wrenched open the door. There was no light. Surely they couldn't be standing outside, talking in the dark.

She saw the team waiting by the feed stack, dim shapes against the sky, reaching and pulling down the hay, and her hands felt numb and icy. Jim must have left them there.

She heard Jim's horse, the hoofs echoing a mad beat in the stillness, running, running. Jim was safe. Thank God, Jim was safe! She had that thought and nothing more, until the horse pounded into the yard, and Jim flung off, panting.

SHE RAN to him. His sleeves dripped sweat. He held her tightly, saying nothing. She felt the heaving of his chest, felt the tremble in his arms, the shaking of his lips against her face.

"I killed him, Rachel. Killed Lew!"

The shock of pain gripped her. His words came out in a harried, frantic jumble. "He wasn't home when I got there, Rachel. I waited for him by the waterhole. Let the horse drink—first good damned drink he's had in weeks. Then Lew came. . ." He was still panting, and she with her hopelessness, let herself lie limply in his arms.

"He saw me, Rachel, saw me, and he never spoke! I thought he'd come out after a while. Then I got damned mad. I yelled at the house. I don't know what I said . . . lots of things."

He caught his breath in a hard, raking gasp, and she reached up to pull his head down on her shoulder. "Lew came out, with his shotgun. It was dark, but I could see him plain in the doorway. He stood there as if he was daring me to shoot first, like he was daring me, Rachel! He didn't know I left my pistol at home."

"He came down the path to the waterhole. 'Damn you, Hoden, where are you anyhow? Stand out so a man can see you!' He said that. I had the cottonwood tree in front of me. I waited until he got close. Then I jumped out and grabbed him."

He stopped, and Rachel could hear the loud beating of his heart. "We tussled for the shotgun. For a while I thought he had me. Then I tripped him, and the shotgun went flying . . ." His mouth bit down on her shoulder. "I grabbed the shotgun, and he got up, cussing. I don't know what got into me, Rachel, I don't know . . . It was like I was blind-drunk . . . blind-mad . . ."

His breath caught again, and he moistened his lips and went on. "I lifted the shotgun up high and brought it down on his head as hard as I could. He fell over backwards . . . head slumped into the waterhole. He didn't move afterwards . . ."

She rubbed the back of his neck, and gradually his breathing quieted, his arms stopped trembling. Inside her was only a numbness, no feeling at all. Then he said quite calmly, "I'm going to the sheriff, Rachel. I wanted to tell you first," and feeling rushed into her. Panic.

Her breath squeezed up in her chest. Run, Jim, run, she thought, save yourself. But Jim would never run. "I'm going with you," she said.

"No, stay home."

"I'm going with you, Jim." She walked over to the wagon and got in, fighting her battle against panic, and winning it. Silently, he took the reins beside her. They rumbled down the road east to town, she watching him, seeing the pride, the hate gone, and only the deep hurt left.

"It was self-defense, Jim. I—I saw it. We'll say that."

"No." He was silent a moment, the shadows deep across his face. "Murder is in a man's heart, Rachel. And murder has been in mine for over a year now."

Then his calm broke, and he was bending over his knees, the hard, dry sobs raking him, a man's terrible crying. "I killed him, Rachel . . . Killed Lew!"

She looked into the darkness, seeking words to comfort him. But there were none. Then she said, "Jim, did you leave a lamp burning at Ford's place?"

"Yes . . . No!"

Now the lamp was glimmering across the darkness. Could it be . . . Jim whipped up the team. They raced down the road, stopping only to open the gate.

Her heart stood still. Ford waited in the doorway of his house.

FORD HELD a lamp in his hand, and the blood was drying on his mat of hair. He peered at Jim and Jim drew a quick, choking breath. "You old goat," he managed finally. "You tough old goat."

"Looking for a corpse, hey?" said Ford. "Thought you wouldn't be back, the way you lit out of here." He grinned, the grin twisting his mouth horribly. "Didn't think I'd just stand there and let you bash my head in, did you? When I see you meant it,

I figured it'd be safest just to lie there, wait'll you went away."

Relief was a twisting hurt in Rachel. Jim was faintly smiling, for the first time in months. Standing in his doorway with the shotgun, Ford had known Jim better than she did, had known Jim wouldn't shoot.

Ford's eyes were bright buttons in the lamplight. "Now what'd you want, anyhow?" he rasped.

"You know damned well what I wanted," Jim said. "You can see what's been happening to me."

"Hell, boy, why didn't you ask, like I told you to?" Ford started to rub his head, then removed his hand gingerly. "Expect me to come over and beg you to take my water? It's *mine*, damn it!"

"Sure, sure, it's yours, you old buzzard," Jim said. "Do we share it, or don't we?"

Ford snorted. "Course we share it! What'd you have to go wranglin', yellin' about who it belonged to, instead of comin' right out man-like and askin' for water?"

Jim grinned then, and Rachel felt the happiness springing in her, seeing Jim the way he used to be. The lamp went higher, the beam falling on Rachel, blinding her. "Lord's sake, brought your woman along, too."

Suddenly, Rachel knew what to say. "Yes, you cantankerous old monster. And if ever you send back a cake of mine, I'll come over here and throw it in your face!"

Ford howled, slapping his knee. "By the Great Lord Harry, you've got yourself a *woman* there, Jim!"

Everything was going to be all right again.

Any day now it might rain, and even if it didn't, they had a neighbor and a friend. Nothing could be better than that. Nothing except seeing Jim free again, free of his hate. Rachel moved closer to Jim, and he with that ridiculous, red-faced grin, took her hand and squeezed it hard.

In the next issue

GUNMAN'S CHOICE

When a fast-gun man slows down, even his hate and fear and hard will to live can't save him

A Magazine-Length Novel

By FRANK P. CASTLE

ROCK RIVER RODEO

All of them were out for Kerry's blood—the man, the woman, and the anger-crazed bronc

An Exciting Novelette

By ROE RICHMOND

A HOME FOR YOUR HEART

It was a delicate, sweet-smelling letter—and just about as innocent as an atom bomb

A Western Short Story

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Petticoat Boom Camp

SOUNDS like a woman's petticoat, instead of a name for a mining camp," one miner scoffed. "Just like something a dude like you'd think up."

Joe Joiner paused as he flecked a speck from his swallowtail coat and stroked his knee-length whiskers. "Why, look at them hills," he said pointing to the Coat-of-Joseph-hued hills nearby. "Nothing looks more like a calico quilt. We don't want 'Silver Gulch,' or even 'Buena Vista.' It's got to be 'Calico,' and no mistake."

Even though the assembled miners were anxious to submit a petition to Washington for a regular post office and mail service, they delayed the matter. It was only a few months since John McBride and Lowery Silver had made the first strike in the spring of 1881, and a few more days wouldn't hurt.

a true story by

Bob and Jan Young

Once Dorsey had the mail sacks on, no one could come near him

But Joe Joiner, in addition to being the camp's dude, was a determined man. And he submitted the postal request, asserting "Calico" had been unanimously selected. When Joe's perfidy was later discovered, disgruntled miners planned retaliation.

Joe Joiner, his whiskers neatly braided, was swilling down dollops of popskull, as he explained his cleverness in getting the camp named Calico. But the patient, revengeful miners waited until Joe, after a full evening, fell asleep on Calico's main street.

When Joe Joiner blinked awake next morning, he was no longer the dude of Calico. During the night, shears had been adeptly applied. The tails had been sheared from his frock coat, and all of his whiskers removed.

But even as Joe's shame was forgotten, the name Calico prevailed, and its mail system continued to attract attention. One day Dorsey, a black and white, scraggly mutt, wagged into the offices of Postmaster James Stacy. Stacy liked the dog, and Dorsey had found himself a home. Stacy often took the dog with him when he visited his mining properties in Bismarck, three miles away.

DORSEY quickly made friends with Stacy's mining partner, and began to divide his time between Calico and Bismarck. Once Stacy urgently needed to send a message to his partner, but couldn't get away. So he tied a note to Dorsey's collar, took him to the Bismarck trail, patted the dog, and pointed the way. In a matter of hours, Dorsey returned to Stacy, with an answer pinned to his collar.

Thereafter Stacy began saddling the dog with a pair of mail sacks and sending him on to Bismarck. While Dorsey was usually a friendly dog, the moment he had the mail sacks on his back, no one except Stacy or his partner could come near him. For four years this intelligent, faithful dog carried the mail, and a celebration was held in his honor in San Francisco for faithful performance of his duties. But, almost human-like, Dorsey apparently couldn't stand prosperity, and shortly disappeared forever from Calico.

Dorsey, in some ways, typefied Calico. Though the first ores grubbed out of the Calico hills were so rich they were carted to the crushers in sacks, rather than the usual gross shipments, in two years values began to decline. In place of rich silver ores, miners now dug up a white, crystalline mineral. A few believed this to be a new type of silver ore, never before encountered, but the wiser heads considered it valueless.

With uncertainty replacing the faith miners had in Calico mines, the happy practice of swindling everyone, even each other, was established. When the newcomers appeared, there was always someone on hand to unload a worthless claim. But when the sucker took the bait, if he was wise he waited until another Johnny-Come-Lately appeared, and unloaded. This jolly process, like two horse traders swapping mounts, and both getting rich, flourished until one of the suckers sent a sample of the white crystalline ore to a San Francisco assayer. He received the incredulous report he was in possession of the finest borax compound known—calcium borate.

W. T. Coleman, usually identified in history with organization of the San Francisco Vigilantes, heard of the assay and circumspectly began buying up claims in the Calico area. And when Calico awakened, many found they had sold their vast mineral heritage for little money and no fame. This new mineral was dubbed colemanite, and when production really got under way, the borax deposits in Death Valley were abandoned. Calico, though noted principally as a silver camp because of the millions produced in its first two years, produced 60 millions in borax values before it, too, was replaced with better deposits found in the Funeral Mountains.

OBVIOUSLY, with this wealth spewing forth, Calico was a lively camp, and though it rose simultaneously with Bodie, Aurora, and other shooting towns, it was a relatively happy camp. And even those few deaths that resulted from shooting fracases were lightly regarded. "Little Bill" Williams, a deadly Mojave Desert gunslick, arrived in Calico early.

According to his usual custom, Little Bill selected the town's bully to establish his reputation. Little Bill deliberately bumped into Irish Tom, brimful of corn squeezings. A happy spirit must have pervaded Irish Tom as he let the hustling pass without a remark, and walked on. But when the pair met again that night, the deadly reputation of Little Bill had preceded him, and Irish Tom was fearfully unhappy. Even his fawning attitude didn't suit Little Bill, and he grabbed Tom's red whiskers and gave them a jerk.

Irish Tom reached for a gun, but Little Bill was faster and Calico's bully was dead.

Hours later Little Bill was accosted by the sheriff and a handful of other citizens. Little Bill, sensing a possible lynching, backed to a wall as they approached.

"Little Bill," the sheriff said, "here in Calico we do things a little neater. But considering you're a stranger here it's likely you didn't know."

Little Bill wonderingly agreed he wasn't aware of local custom.

"If you have to eliminate any more of our citizens, we sure would admire to have it done a little nearer the cemetery. Saves the trouble of lugging them across the canyon to Boot Hill."

Little Bill agreed he'd be more thoughtful in marking the spots for his victims.

But some of the miscreants weren't as thoughtful when it came to requiring the services of bluff, brusque Dr. Rhea, who arrived in Calico from Pennsylvania in the early '80s. Though he was gruff and critical of every patient, Dr. Rhea frequently served those from whom he knew there was no hope of a fee. He was often aroused from his sleep to minister to a drunken derelict who had been hacked, shot, or otherwise injured. And though Dr. Rhea complained outwardly, his manner was even gruffer when miners chided him for his many unspoken and unsung kindnesses.

In defense, old Dr. Rhea adopted a standard retort after he had been ragged unmercifully for tending another wanderer.

"I can't afford to let them die," the doctor growled. "They owe me too much money."

English Jack Dent was likely one of those Dr. Rhea tended during his practice in Calico. For Jack was a jughound without peer; Jack took his drinking even more seriously than most men. Jack's companions were intrigued with his solemn statement: "When I cash in my checks, I want to be drunk. Dead drunk! Get it?"

Jack, who leased a small claim on the outskirts of town, generally scraped enough cash together for his usual Saturday night revel with Bacchus at the Combination saloon. Jack wasn't making par for the course that night, as he was stretched out on a pool table before midnight. But he drunkenly babbled just before his eyes fluttered closed.

"Count me in on the next round too."

So as the next round was set up, someone took the extra drink, pried Jack's jaws open, and slopped it down. The celebration broke up about dawn, with Jack having taken an active yet vicarious part. But when they came to rouse him, Jack was out cold —cold with the freeze of death that had taken him some time during the past night.

English Jack Dent had his fondest wish come true.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

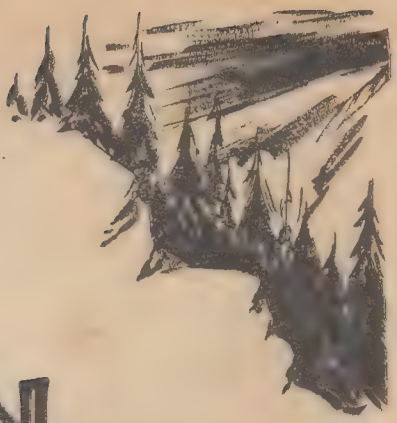
Next Issue—a Review of Universal's

BLACK HORSE CANYON

Featuring RACE GENTRY, JOEL McCREA and MARI BLANCHARD

Plus an Illustrated Personality Sketch of **GLENN FORD**

WAR ON THE RAMHORN

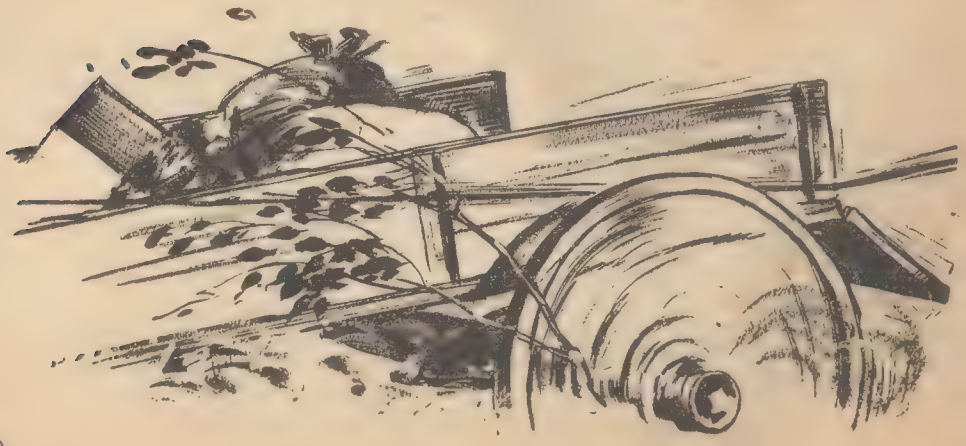


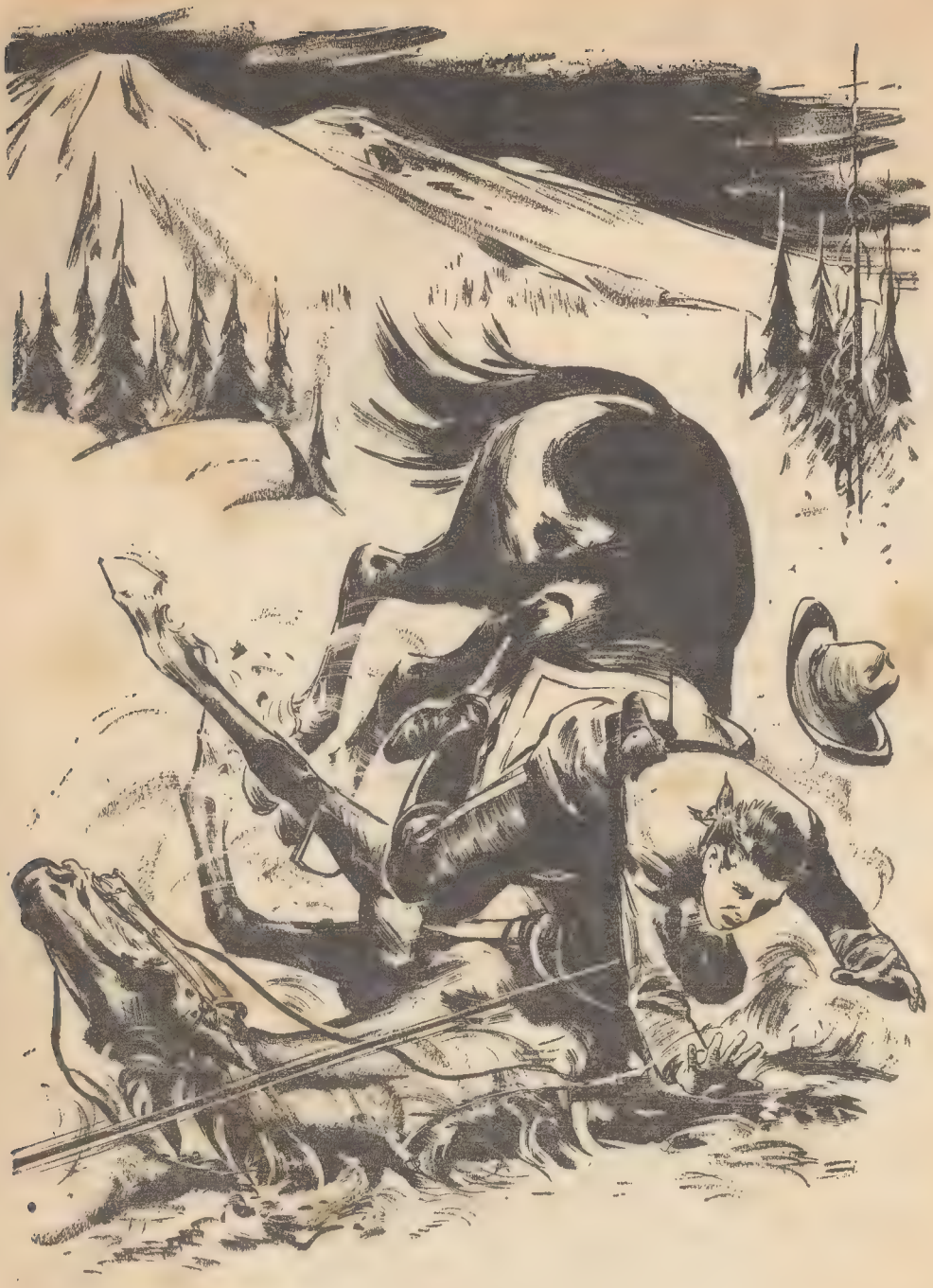
by ELSA BARKER

PART ONE

SERGEANT BRIAN O'TARA, U. S. Cavalry, viewed the world with a disgruntled eye. For his part in a bit of a brawl, the "black Irish" three-striper was under military arrest.

His blue uniform considerably rumpled, he viewed the neat back of the blond young officer riding ahead of him with anything but brotherly love. Captain Aubrey Grayson sat his saddle with military precision, his back, neck and shoulders as stiff as a stone statue, in a tunic tailored to his figure as if some plastic substance had been poured over him and left to dry.





SERGEANT O'TARA found he'd have to buck the army if he was going to flush out his brother's killer

Sergeant O'Tara belched in an unmilitary manner. That little brawl over a dice game in Bobo Ortega's Cantina Alegre had been nothing for the captain to get so stiff-necked about. True, there had been a window broken, some chairs smashed, a few eyes blacked, but it was nothing worse than what might occur any day in Los Vernales when soldiers with nothing better to do happened to get a little too much Dutch courage under their belts.

Any officer but a meddlesome martinet would have managed to look the other way.

Sergeant Sam Foley, who functioned as Captain Grayson's orderly, clerk and general handyman in this almost duty-less remnant of the Army of the West, rode placidly alongside O'Tara, obviously enjoying his present role as armed escort for a fellow non-com under arrest.

"'Tis a beautiful specimen of black eye you're wearin' northeast of your handsome nose, Sergeant O'Tara," he grinned. "Too bad we've no surgeon at the fort to inspect it!"

Brian swore at him, loud enough for the captain to hear, but the stiff blue tunic turned not at all in the saddle.

"You saw the captain comin' and gave no signal of alarm!"

Sam Foley didn't deny it. "Brawling like a rear-rank trooper," he chided. "Tsk-tsk!"

"Some day you'll grin on the other side of your warty nose," Brian assured him grumpily. "An O'Tara never forgets!"

Still grinning, Sergeant Foley happily hummed the air of a bawdy old barracks-room ballad about a "Sarge who was large, but dim in the wit"—with a following unprintable sequence of robust rhymes.

Foley was a big man; ruddy-faced, thick-muscled, without the slimness of youthful brawn that made O'Tara a second-look man with the ladies. Foley had been in the army ten years and boasted that he aimed to stay as long as he could continue to rate three stripes in such a soft assignment.

The thudding of horses' hoofs cushioned on the bunchgrass sod of Mile-Away Mesa changed into a clacky clatter as they turned into the rutted wagon road that tethered Fort Grayson loosely to the county seat of White Rock. Ahead loomed the high adobe walls of the old fort's stockade, rain-washed now, and crumbling in spots. By the main gate a lone guard indolently walked his post.

The massive log gates sagged open, for it was now some five years since the last settlement-raiding Ute, Apache and Comanche had been permanently corralled on reservations. In the days of its glory, Fort Grayson had been a principal guardian of the Santa Fe Trail, a bustling supply and remount depot for the Union troops that choused General Sibley back to Texas during the War of the Rebellion, and the well-mannered homebase for many an expedition of hard-riding cavalrymen against various warlike tribes of Indians. In those days its high-poled flag had often waved over the single parade of a thousand crack troopers wheeling smartly in review on its great walled-in parade ground, their pennons flying, sabers gleaming, bugles re-echoing from all the nearby hills.

But now, since the coming of the railroad to White Rock, thirty miles away, with no more wagon trains to guard, no war to fight, no raiding Indians to chase back across the mountains, the once great military post had become little more than a wistful relic, an almost forgotten hangover from once proud history. Commanded by generals in its heyday, now its dwindled garrison took orders from a mere captain, with no more than one to three lieutenants to help him. Now, beyond a nominal support of local law or offering stopover haven for an occasional wagon train, the functions of the fort were few, the duties of the garrison limited to the monotony of drill, post "housekeeping" and dress-up parade.

Captain Grayson returned the guard's salute in stiff perfection, his handsome young face as unsmiling as if he were returning from some hard-fought battle.

The guard's eye noted Sergeant O'Tara's blackening eye, and a grin broke his lips. Brian grinned back, his good humor returning, and with it the crystallization of an

idea that had been budging around in his mind for some time. Already several men of the garrison had applied direct to the War Department for their discharge and been released from the army without much difficulty or delay. As far as the military moguls in Washington were concerned, the west was won.

O'Tara lacked only a little of completing a three-year hitch. For the most part he had liked the rough life of a cavalryman, but lately he had grown tired of the martinet discipline of the captain, and even of the second-rate brawls at the Cantina Alegre in Los Vernales on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

To hell with it, he thought now, wholly

LUCITA

impenitent for what he considered mere petty wrongdoing.

RIDING into the central plaza formed by a ring of officer's quarters, the sergeant's interest in life perked up as his one usable Irish eye took note of two young women seated in the shade of gnarly cottonwoods in front of Lieutenant Blanding's quarters, fanning themselves against the midafternoon heat.

"Eyes front, me bucko!" advised Sergeant Foley. "That's for officers only!"

"So's hell," shrugged O'Tara. "And what's it to you?"

Captain Grayson drew up in front of a long adobe building that combined the C.O.'s office, orderly rooms, and what Fort Grayson troopers called The Chamber of Unholy Injustice.

The two girls strolled across toward him. One was the pretty blonde wife of Lieutenant Blanding. The other Brian O'Tara had seen a few times in Los Vernales, as well as here at the fort. She was the only daughter of "Baron" René Broussard, owner of the huge Ramhorn Land Grant that fanned out for miles on three sides of Fort Grayson, and reputed to be undisputed lord over a domain of valley, mesa, and mountain too vast even to have ever been measured.

Captain Grayson dismounted and handed the reins to Sergeant Foley.

"Unsaddle him—and saddle my black. I shall escort Miss Broussard home later."

"Yes, sir!" Sergeant Foley saluted with brisk perfection, but delayed his departure with the horses. He aimed a wink at O'Tara and saw himself silently called a bad name under O'Tara's breath.

As the two girls approached, a perverse impulse took hold of Brian O'Tara.

"Captain Grayson, sir!" He clipped out the words in a manner that matched his salute. "Sergeant Brian O'Tara requests the privilege of making application for withdrawal from the military service, sir, at the earliest possible date!"

Grayson turned the stern gaze of cold blue eyes on the young sergeant. "At the moment you are still in the army—and under arrest!"

"Yes, sir," said Brian, allowing a slightly less respectful drawl to creep into his voice. "Barrin' you fine me too much for a petty misdemeanor, I've savings enough to buy me some of that land the White Rock Development Company is selling near here, Captain. As a civilian I might set the army an example of virtue, sir!"

A touch of angry color came into the captain's cheeks. "You know the position of the Army with regard to that land!"

"No, sir," said Brian. "I know how *you* feel about it—but I know of no policy from Washington."

"That sounds like insolence, Sergeant!"

"No, sir," Brian said. "Sergeant Foley tells me that anyone with as long as thirty months' service can apply for immediate discharge. I was only explainin' why—"

"Your explanations can wait!"

The captain stopped as the Broussard girl's voice broke in.

"You'd better save your money, Sergeant. Every acre of that land is on the Ramhorn Grant, of which my father is owner!"

Brian O'Tara looked at her with more than casual interest. What he saw was a slender, black-haired girl, delicately featured, with slanting black brows over dark blue eyes. High cheekbones gave her face an oddly pixy-ish look that was not quite beautiful, yet far more challenging than if it were merely pretty.

"There may be some argument about that, ma'am."

Lucita Broussard's smile was cool. "Hardly, Sergeant. Papa will never permit even a single farmer to settle there!"

Brian would have liked to argue further, but the captain's curt voice cut him off.

"You are dismissed, Sergeant! Go to the orderly room and await me there!"

"Yes, sir," said Brian. But he paused to address the girl again. "Just the same, miss, that land is openly offered for—"

"Sergeant O'Tara!" There was real rage in the captain's tone now. "You will be confined to quarters thirty days for insolence! Foley—O'Tara will help you with the horses. Then take him to the west grounds for two hours' foot drill. I'll hear your plea on the disorderly conduct charge tomorrow, O'Tara. You will be lucky not to find yourself reduced to private—again!"

BRIAN O'TARA'S face darkened. "Private or not, sir," he began, "I've a thing or two to say to—"

Turning to go with the horses, Sam Foley suddenly bumped into him.

"Keep your mouth shut!" he growled under his breath. "You buckin' for a general court?"

A deeper pink crept into the captain's cheeks as he turned again to the women.

"You damned knuckle-noggin'!" Sam swore at Brian as they led the horses away. "You want to get out of the army, so you red-rag the captain mad enough that he won't even send in your application!"

"If he do, he do; if he don't, he don't. I was only havin' a bit of a frolic with him."

"You'll be frolickin' in the guardhouse, whistle-wit, with its tin roof fit to fry eggs in this blister-blasted sun!"

"Just the same," Brian said, suddenly sober, "I've a strong notion to buy some of that land. I had a letter from my brother Timmy—God save him—the other day. He's been reading the advertisements and he wants me to partner him. He's just a lad, but already hit by hard luck—a sickness of the lungs. He's on his way out with a wagon train of landseekers. Six years since I saw the lad, Foley."

Sam Foley grunted. "You heard the young lady. Broussard says it's his land. I wouldn't want to be the one to argue with the baron."

Brian shrugged. "I ain't lookin' for trouble, but if I stay in the army I'll have it some day with Grayson, and I ain't never been no hand to dodge my way out when it comes. . . ."

Brian O'Tara pulled up a moment to let his horse and pack mule catch their wind, thanking the good fortune that had taken Captain Grayson to Santa Fe on army business for a few days. It had not been too hard to persuade Lieutenant Blanding to issue him a three-day pass, although his "confined to quarters" sentence was only half served. There had been a time when Sergeant O'Tara had saved the life of a green young lieutenant, and Blanding had not forgotten it. Likely when the captain got back there would be hell to pay, but that was a skunk to be skinned when he got to it.

Several wagonloads of immigrants had already arrived, his young brother Timothy probably with them, but Brian had not seen him. Grayson had refused to let the wagon train camp inside the fort, presum-

ably because he had already taken his stand with Broussard against the White Rock Development Company and any settlers they might bring in.

Brian had never wanted to be a farmer himself, but for Timothy this dry clear air would mean a chance for life. Looking up the lush green valley, even Brian felt a stir of excitement. The country looked as good as John Caton, lawyer for the development company, had told him it was.

On the way up he had passed a dozen abandoned adobe houses—native *ranchitos* at some time in the past, some of them still showing the old fire scars of an Indian raid. While the country was safe again now, the descendants of the original Spanish colonies on this 15,000-acre tract of land had never moved back.

The winter before, a group of business men in the nearby town of White Rock had formed a company, bought a strip of land that included the valleys of Caballo and Vernal Creeks from the heirs of the original settlers, and were offering it for sale to encourage farmers from the Midwest to settle there. The choicest locations would be sold to those who bought first, and even for those times the price was cheap, kept so by the promoters for the sake of settling the country.

AS HE RODE, Brian had noticed that there were several fresh wagon tracks in the deeply rutted road. He had been noticing too, a good many cattle wearing a big brand that covered the left hip—a fancy, curlicued Spanish V—that had been the brand of Carlos Vallejo, grantee of the tract of land from the King of Spain in the early eighteen hundreds. Folks now called it the Ramhorn. The presence of Ramhorn cattle in such numbers could mean only one thing: that René Broussard's cowboys had put them here as notice to all comers that Broussard claimed ownership of the land.

The boundary descriptions of old Spanish and Mexican land grants were always vague, but were usually settled peaceably by long-time usage. The Vallejo family, original recipients of the Ramhorn grant, had been generous, improvident people and had never laid claim, by possession or otherwise, to this strip along Vernal and Caballo Creeks. Neither had René Broussard, who had married Luz Louisa, the last of the Vallejos—not until the Midwest homeseekers started moving in.

His horse rested, Brian settled for an easy trot, the mule hauling stubbornly on the lead rope. Rounding a bend in the valley, he saw three tongued wagons and a shafted rig stopped close to the river under a grove of cottonwoods. He approved their choice. The grass here was knee-deep, the valley wide.

There were a couple of small tents, and bedrolls under all three wagons. Down in the meadow a bunch of hobbled work horses and three or four gaunt milk cows were grazing. A big brown stud of work-horse breeding tugged at the end of his stake rope, nickering to the strange horse.

A small man left the campfire group and went to the horse, wooling him on the head as he might have petted a dog. The horse nuzzled affectionately at his shoulder while he untied the rope and moved him to fresh grass.

A couple of kids and a woolly brown and yellow pup were playing around the fire, getting in the way of the women as they fixed supper. The pup set up a querulous yapping, ran out a dozen yards, trying to sound threatening, then lost his courage and scurried back, tail down.

A big, blond man with a curly red-yellow beard dropped his ax where he was cutting wood and came to meet him, smiling.

"Just in time for supper, my good friend!"

Brian eased sideways in the saddle. "My name's Brian O'Tara. I'm lookin' for—"

A man came scrambling out of a bed under one of the wagons. "Brian!" His shout was pure joy.

Timothy was skeleton-gaunt, but there was tan in his cheeks, his eyes were clear, and there was muscle in the grip of his hand.

Brian had swung down from his horse to meet him. Now the two drew back to eye each other with a brightness in their eyes that was close to tears.

"I'm getting well, Brian!" the young man burst out eagerly. "No fever for a week. And I feel good now!"

Brian's hand on his shoulder tightened. "That's good, kid. I brought some money to buy land. You pick it out. As soon as I'm out of the army I'll join you."

"I've picked it out and got papers on it, Brian. Up yonder a piece there's another wide spot in the valley like this. A good spring, and we'll have the best neighbors in the world. I'd never have made it out from St. Louis without the Ledbetters."

The big man held out his hand. "By damn, I'm tickled—"

"Mark!" said a woman's voice sharply.

The big man grinned. "Sorry, Marda! Sometimes slips the tongue! Mark Ledbetter my name is!" He waved an arm toward the two women by the campfire. "This is my wife, Marda. My daughter, Dora. And the two little ones—Karl and Anneke."

Mrs. Ledbetter was a tall, gaunt, dark woman with a tight, disapproving mouth. The girl, Dora, somewhere in her late teens, was like her father, buxom and rosy-cheeked, with two braids of flaxen hair wound around her head, and friendly blue eyes. She said hello when Brian looked at her, and smiled. The two children stared solemnly.

The little man who had gone to quiet the brown stud came spryly up from the meadow. He had mousey brown hair, threaded with white, a dark skin, and a wide, drooping mustache.

"This is Dr. Polk Rankin—my wife's brother."

Brian noted the baggy, dirty clothes, the gnarled, tobacco-browned fingers.

"Horse doctor?"

There was a glint of humor in the doctor's eyes. "Man or beast—I ain't particular." His voice was pleasant, oddly deep and resonant to come out of such a spindly chest. "I'm the discoverer and sole concocter of Rankin's Wonderful Elixir of Life, good for man or beast, internally or externally—it cures whatever ails you!"

"It never done me good," said Mrs. Ledbetter sourly. "My back aches somethin' terrible all the time." She grimaced at Brian O'Tara. "You might as well stay to supper. We ain't got much an' likely it won't be fit to eat. But you're welcome."

She made the invitation sound so grudging that Brian hesitated.

Mark Ledbetter laughed, and so did the girl and Tim. The big farmer put his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Your beasts first I help you take care of; then you will see how my wife can cook."

"Hurry then," Mrs. Ledbetter looked again at Brian. "Be sure you wash yourself good at the creek. I don't allow anybody to sit at my table—even if I ain't got a table—unless they're washed."

Brian felt his face getting red, but caught Tim's wink before a brusque retort rose to his tongue.

Still chuckling, Ledbetter started unpacking Brian's mule. He chin-pointed at his wife's thin back. "Scoldings all the time, and nothing it means. Best damn woman in the world—but mighty damn scared somebody finds it out!"

HALF AN HOUR later Brian could at least agree that she had maligned the quality of her own cooking. They had fresh venison stew swimming in rich gravy, with golden brown Dutch oven bis-

O'Tara gave her a bitter look. "He was my brother," he said

cuits, and a dried peach pie, flaky crusted and still warm from baking.

"This is mighty good food," Brian said.

Something like a flush of pleasure stole over the woman's brown cheeks, but her lips took another turn downward.

"Ashes an' smoke in it till it ain't fit to eat."

Dr. Rankin laughed and rubbed his flat stomach.

"If all women could cook like you, Marthy—I'd soon be out of business."

"You oughta be out of business anyhow. If your medicine was any good, my back wouldn't purely kill me all the time like it does."

The pup barked again. He ran as far as the edge of light, then came hustling back.

They heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and a moment later two men and a slender, dark-haired girl rode close to the camp and stopped. Ledbetter went to meet them, smiling.

"Good evening, my friends! You are in time for supper!"

None of the three made any move to dismount. The girl's eyes drifted over the camp, and rested on Brian O'Tara with a faint look of surprise.

"Could it be possible that you people have some intention of settling here?" The voice was politely hostile, the speaker a small, dark man, with an arrogant, high-beaked nose. His horse was a high-headed palomino, and there looked to be about fifty pounds of silver trimmings on his saddle.

Brian O'Tara knew that this was old man trouble himself, and he went to stand by Mark Ledbetter's side.

The man's arrogant eyes looked him over, noting the blue uniform, the sergeant's stripes on his sleeve.

"A soldier? Does Captain Grayson know you are here?"

"The Captain's in Santa Fe."

"Your name, please?"

"None of your damned business!"

The girl shifted uneasily in her saddle. The man on the palomino glanced at her, then swung his eyes to Mark Ledbetter.

"I come to inform you that you are trespassing here. You are on the Ramhorn Grant. You will please pack up and leave the first thing in the morning."

Polite, thought Brian O'Tara, but tough—tough as hell!

Ledbetter looked bewildered. "There must be mistake! This land—"

"There is no mistake! This is my property! You will be on your way in the morning or there will be trouble! I bid you good night!" He turned his horse. "Come, Casey—Lucita!"

For a moment the girl held back, her troubled eyes on the silent farmer folks; then without speaking she followed her father.

Mark Ledbetter shook his head. "Maybe you make him mad," he said to Brian.

"Maybe I did. He ain't used to sass. That was the great René Broussard, so-called baron, owner of the Ramhorn Grant. The tough lookin' cowboy that kept his mouth shut is Casey Hancock, Broussard's range boss. What do you folks aim to do?"

"Stay, of course," said Tim.

Ledbetter rubbed his broad forehead. "Trouble I don't want with nobody. I am a peaceable man—but by damn, I have good title paper for my land and here I will stay, because on our side is right! That we investigate before we come!"

LUCITA BROUSSARD could act and look like her father's idea of a lady when she wanted to—which wasn't often. From her French father she had inherited dark blue eyes, a fiery temper, and a touch of arrogance; from her Spanish mother jet-black hair, a tender, generous heart, and the look of a slightly devilish angel.

From them both she would someday inherit more, for she was the adored only child of René and Luz Vallejo Broussard.

In a day when ladies didn't do much horseback riding, Lucita had yielded to her mother's ideas of modesty enough to wear a divided riding skirt instead of pants, but she refused a side saddle and rode astride like a man.

Now as they rode away from the wagon

camp on Vernal Creek, Lucita dropped back behind her father and Casey Hancock, her eyes thoughtful and troubled.

"What's the powders now, Rainy?" Casey Hancock asked.

Broussard said firmly: "Scare them out if you can, Casey. You know ways to do it. But remember—there's law in the Territory now. We've got to be careful."

Casey Hancock laughed. His voice was a slow Texas drawl.

"Hell, man, the law hereabouts is Fort Grayson. An' I've heard you've got influence there."

"I want no trouble if I can help it," René Broussard said flatly. "Fort Grayson isn't the whole story. We've got county officers—a sheriff and several deputies. I don't want shooting unless it's necessary."

An uneasy shiver went up Lucita's spine. She spurred up alongside her father.

"Papa, that really *isn't* our land, is it? I've always thought the ridge this side of Vernal Creek was our eastern boundary."

"I had never been sure about that, *ma petite,*" René Broussard said quickly, "until lately. Recently I've talked to some of the old-timers and they tell me Vernal Creek used to be the one they now call the Caballo. That makes this land the White Rock Company is selling a part of the Ramhorn."

"But, Papa, if—"

"It's fifteen thousand acres, *linda mía.* It's mine—and I want it."

"We've never claimed it before. The settlers are buying it in good faith. They look like such honest, hard-working people!"

René Broussard frowned impatiently. He spoiled his daughter in some ways, but he expected womenfolk to keep their noses out of men's business.

"It's this way, *chiquita,*" he said. "In the first place the Bon Dieu made this country for cattle, not farming. The seasons are too short and too dry. Our climate is crazy, you know that— sometimes killing frost as late as the first of June, and again the first of September. That's not long enough to grow crops. And the plots of land are too small. Who can support a family on ten, even thirty acres?"

"The *paisanos* used to do it, Papa! Mama Luz has told me that in her grandfather's day they used to raise big crops of oats and wheat and potatoes — before the gringos taught the Indians to become enemies and raid them."

"That was different, *ma petite.* If the Spanish *paisanos* failed to make a crop, there was always a rich *patrón* on the Ramhorn with jobs or free charity to tide them over—first Don Carlos Vallejo, then the other Vallejos, and finally myself. But I will not be a generous protector to these gringo intruders. They will steal my beef and there will be trouble for all. *Linda mía,* these are matters women do not comprehend."

"Maybe not, Papa, but these settlers are already here, and—"

"They will have to go." Broussard's tone grew angry. "If they stay, there will be more children who have to have schools. There will be many *chivos*—but only one goat: René Broussard, who will have to pay most of the taxes they vote to build those schools. I will be ruined!"

"That's right," put in Casey Hancock in his soft drawl. "I seen what happened in Texas when the farmers moved in. Plow up the grass, the land blows away. Better stop it before it starts!"

"And if we can't?" asked Lucita.

"I can," said René Broussard. "I know a dozen old-timers who will swear that is Ramhorn land."

Casey Hancock laughed. "Not to mention the army and influence in Washington!"

Broussard frowned. "Count that out. True, I have friends in Congress, but these land grant titles are a mess. It will be years before they are settled. Meantime we've got to do our own title-clearing the best way we can—by not letting the squatters ever get started!"

Casey Hancock got off to open the gate that led into the outer yard of the ranch headquarters.

"Come up to the office after supper, Casey," Broussard said.

The ranch manager nodded. Broussard

rode on toward the house where old Pablo would be waiting to take his horse. When Lucita would have followed him, Hancock put a hand on her bridle.

"Could I talk to you a minute, Lucita?"

The girl eyed him curiously a moment, then said: "Of course." She slipped out of the saddle to walk beside him the short distance to the corrals.

THIS SLOW, drawling Texan with the hard, mocking gray eyes had interested her from the time he first started working for the Ramhorn a year ago. She had been aware of the way his eyes followed her, and had known that she attracted him, but this was the first time he had ever addressed her with anything but the impersonal deference due the boss's daughter.

Casey Hancock was a rangy, broad-shouldered man with the kind of homely, high-cheek boned face that is often so attractive to women. He was reputed to have the morals of a tomcat, but whenever his bold gray-green eyes looked at a woman she was reminded that she was a female. Most women didn't mind.

He wore good clothes and he kept them neat. He carried a lot of fancy extras on his saddle that most cowboys wouldn't have been bothered with—tapaderos to protect the fine leather of his boots; a small, ornately carved saddlebag, and special buckle rigging to carry this *maleta*. In it he carried a tally book and sometimes a bottle of whisky. His lass rope was a long length of supple, braided rawhide, and he usually carried a handsome, hand-braided quirt.

Most of the Ramhorn cowboys carried similar quirts, made for them by an old, half-blind *paisano* named Otero. It might take the old man two weeks to braid one, but each would last a lifetime.

Now as he and Lucita stopped by the corrals, Casey shoved his black hat to the back of his head, and slapped at his leg with the quirt. It gave Lucita a feeling of wicked pleasure to see the embarrassed uneasiness in his manner. Casey was usually so self-confident.

"You've been seeing a lot of Captain Grayson lately," he said finally.

Lucita smiled. "A few other men come to see me too," she said lightly.

"Your father likes him," Casey went on. "Captain Grayson—prize pretty boy of the Army. Son of the late General Grayson that they named the fort after. First family of Virginia. Plumb high totem. I don't reckon Rainy would take it kindly if —if a common man—just an ordinary cowhand, say like me, would try his luck?"

Lucita shrugged in a pretty, feminine gesture. "There are a few things Papa cannot decide, and whom I marry is one of them. He has been the grand *patrón* so long that sometimes he forgets he was once just a poor trapper himself—one of Kit Carson's mountain men."

"You mean I can—"

"I mean nothing. I just talk a lot." She was pleasantly aware that she was treading on dangerous ground; that Casey Hancock was a hard, direct man unused to the casual flirting she enjoyed with the handsome Captain Grayson.

"Captain Grayson has not asked me to marry him. Maybe he won't. And if he does maybe I'll say no. Like I'd say no to you, Casey, if you asked me now. But tomorrow—"

"Lucita!" He caught her arm in a grip that made her wince. "If you mean I've got a chance, all hell can't stop me!"

She tried to pull away, then stood still, and her suddenly sobered eyes met his.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have teased you, I'm not in love with you or anybody else. Besides, I've heard bad stories about you and a girl in Los Vernales. I thought you were going to marry *her*."

Embarrassment and anger leaped to his eyes.

"Who's been talkin' such stuff to you?"

"Women gossip about such things, just like men do."

"That Vernales gal means nothing to me! I was lonesome when I first came, an' she was friendly. That's all. I'm crazy about you, Lucita—an' have been from the first minute I laid eyes on you!"

Lucita drew back, suddenly frightened by the searing eagerness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry if you misunderstood me, Casey," she said stiffly. "I don't think you will ever have any chance with me." Lucita could be as arrogant as her father, particularly when her conscience told her she hadn't been behaving well. She said coldly: "Will you please let go of my arm!"

Slowly his grasp slackened, then surprisingly he smiled at her.

"I'm sorry I scared you, honey," he said, an odd velvet in his tone. "But you're not scarin' me!"

Lucita walked away from him, fast. She ducked quickly through a side door, noticing as she did so a tall sorrel with an army saddle, tied to the hitch rack under the cottonwoods.

X

INSIDE the great beam-ceilinged living room, sitting stiffly on the beautiful, fragile and very uncomfortable chairs that had been freighted by ox team from Mexico City, were her prim, plump mother and Captain Grayson.

The captain stood up when she came into the room. His smile was warm but correct, his bow militarily and socially perfect.

"You were a long time," said her mother gently. "Captain Grayson is staying to dinner."

Lucita had smiles for them both. She thought if her mother had not been here she would have thrown her arms around the neck of Captain Grayson and kissed him, just for being the kind of safe, courteous gentleman she was used to. For a moment she was sure she loved him. It was impossible to believe that the captain had ever smelled sweaty or that he would ever have an affair with one of Bobo Ortega's fancy girls.

She smiled and said calmly: "I'm sorry I was late, *mamacita.*"

Casey Hancock's contemptuous description of the captain as "pretty boy" had some merit. His hair was golden, thick and curly. His eyes were big and blue, with long lashes any girl would have envied. His features were regular, his voice well modulated with a bit of Southern accent. He was neither tall nor rangy, but his tightly uniformed build was perfect.

Mrs. Broussard said gently: "Run and change, Lucita. You smell like horses."

"All right, Mama. I'm glad you're staying, Aubrey!"

Upstairs in her room, she loitered by the window overlooking the corrals for a minute, thinking of Casey Hancock and of Captain Grayson, the flush still in her cheeks, the hard pounding in her heart.

"I must be about marrying size," she thought. "But which one? How does a woman ever really know for sure?"

Then her mind drifted back to the squatters camped on Vernal Creek, and the young sergeant with the crinkly black hair who had been with them. Those hardy homeseekers had all been clean, honest-looking folks. Her father was honest, too, of course; he believed in the course he was taking, or he would not be taking it. But surely there must be some fair way of judging what was right.

There were almost always guests for dinner here on the Ramhorn. This evening there were the Trujillos who owned a similar big grant south of White Rock, and a Dr. Welsey who had come out once before to see Mrs. Broussard following one of the attacks to which she had been subject—generally without her husband's knowledge—for the past year or two. So it was not until much later that Lucita found a chance for a private word with Captain Grayson.

"I hoped to have a word with you before dinner," he said. "But you took your time about coming back down."

Lucita looked at him soberly. "I was thinking about that new land company. I met some of the farmers this afternoon. I wonder who that land really belongs to?"

"To your father, of course."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because it's my business to keep informed on what's legal. When I heard about the new company I looked into their titles."

"There's going to be trouble," Lucita said slowly. "They believe the company

has a legal right to sell them the land, and they aren't the kind of folks to be pushed around."

He touched her arm and smiled down at her.

"Don't worry about it; I can stretch my authority a little to help your father out. It is a proper function of the army to keep law and order."

Lucita frowned again, one part of her mind still worrying about the settlers, another part recognizing that she had successfully spoiled the captain's sentimental mood and kept him from the question she suspected he had intended to ask—a question she was not yet quite ready to answer.

Aubrey Grayson had a lot of qualities that attracted her. She sometimes suspected that her father's money added to her charm in the captain's eyes, but the same was probably true of most men she met.

It didn't hurt the captain's standing to know that her parents liked him. Lucita was no rebel. She would have balked at an old-fashioned match, pre-arranged by her father, but she had always hoped that the man she eventually chose would have their approval.

In the meantime she was having fun being Lucita Broussard—young, attractive, the pampered only daughter of the wealthiest land owner in northern New Mexico, and she had never yet met a man who made her feel really sure she was ready to give up that carefree life for the responsibilities of marriage.

BRIAN and Timothy O'Tara sloshed cold water from the creek over their sweaty faces, scrubbing their hands with clean sand from the creek bottom. Tim touched the light green stalk of a tall plant growing at the water's edge, calling it to his brother's attention.

"Doc Rankin says the root of this is poison," he said. "Wild parsnip. Grows along all the creeks around here. But stock can eat the tops, along with plenty other green stuff, without hurting them, so I figure it's nothin' to worry about. Take a sniff. Smells kinder parsnippy, doesn't it?"

Obediently Brian took a sniff, but without any great concern. The way Tim was taking to this farm deal, noticing everything, eager to learn about it all, gave his heart a great contentment.

They moved to the shade of a cottonwood and spread their lunch. Tim gazed out over the lush green vega, his deepening sense of satisfaction showing in his dark blue eyes. At his insistence they had already surveyed and staked out their acreage and marked off the location against a south-facing hill near a spring, where the log and sod cabin would be. Tim cut a little hunk of grass sod out with his pocket knife and rolled the rich black dirt through his fingers.

"It's the chance of a lifetime, Brian," he said. "You won't be sorry you kicked in your savings. This land will grow anything!"

"Maybe includin' trouble," said Brian soberly. "A big shot like Broussard can be plenty tough to buck. You take care of yourself, kid, and don't go spittin' in no tiger's face when you don't have to. I wish I could stick around to look after you, but it's liable to take quite a spell to get my papers cleared in Washington and get out of the army. Maybe we should have waited—"

"We couldn't wait, Brian! This way we got our pick of the land—the best doggone farm on the creek."

"Yeah," agreed Brian, "it looks purty nice."

He couldn't share Tim's enthusiasm for farming, but he did like the healthy, tanned look of his brother's cheeks, the eager, fever-free brightness of his eyes. He gave Tim's shoulder a light fisted punch.

"All right," he said. "But sleep with your eyes open. Broussard packs a lot of weight around these parts, an' that Hancock saddle-pounder he had with him ain't no pet pussy."

He crammed a last bite of cold biscuit in his mouth and stood up.

"I'll have to get back to the fort now. I'll come out when I can, but that won't likely be often, specially if the captain finds

out I've got an interest in this land."

Tim nodded. "I won't mind the work," he said earnestly. "It's my big chance, Brian, an' I sure aim to do my part. The Ledbetters will help an' show me how; I'll get along. Don't you worry."

"How about you an' the Ledbetter girl, Tim?"

Young Timothy O'Tara flushed and looked away. "I like her— an' I reckon she knows it—but I ain't said anything. I don't aim to until I'm sure I'm going to get well. Say, what's that racket?"

From down the canyon came a pounding of hoofs, the rattle of a wagon, and a man's shouted profanity.

Dora slapped the cowboy hard before Brian pulled her away

ABOVE the old road a dozen loose horses, mostly mares with colts, broke out of a small aspen grove on the dead run, their broomy tails fanned high. A hundred yards behind them, losing distance with every lurch, came Polk Rankin's big, brown Belgian stud at a lumbering run, pulling Rankin's light one-horse wagon after him at a careening speed that threatened to overturn it as the rickety old wheels bounced over the thick grass hummocks.

The little doctor was crouched in the front of the wagon, holding onto the dash with one hand, yanking with all his might on the reins with the other, shouting curses to high heaven with every jolting bump.

The O'Tara boys couldn't help laughing. But they also ran for their horses. Funny or not, it was trouble that needed help. The doctor might jump out to safety, but in that case the wagon would almost surely be smashed to pieces, and the stallion possibly crippled. And Polk Rankin showed no sign of getting ready to jump.

As Brian reached for his horse, he caught a quick glimpse of two riders dis-

appearing into the aspen thicket out of which the mares had come. Suddenly there was nothing funny about this at all, for he knew it was deliberately contrived to make trouble. Those little mares, wildies usually ranging in the canyon roughs, evidently had been driven down in front of the old stallion purposely to make him run away.

Soldiering in the west, Brian had learned something about roping. Now he raced his horse up alongside the careening wagon, loosed his rope and tossed it. It was not a hard catch to make. The fat, short-winded old horse, encumbered by the wagon, wasn't exactly making much time. Brian's loop settled around the thick neck. He reined up sharply for the bust—and what a bust it was! When the big stud hit the end of the rope, Brian's lighter horse was jerked to his knees. He flip-flopped on over, turning a somersault. Brian managed to kick his feet out of the stirrups, but not in time to take his fall entirely free of the tumbled horse.

Pinned down though he was, Brian saw that his rope had stopped the big Belgian, but that the stallion was now busy kicking the front end of Doc's rig all to smithereens. He couldn't see what had happened to Doc, but he caught a glimpse of Tim awkwardly slapping the loop of his own rope over the snorting stallion's head.

"Hey, Tim!" he yelled, at the same time scrambling desperately to get himself free of his own still struggling horse. "You better not—"

At that moment a flailing hoof clipped him behind the ear, and that was all for Sergeant O'Tara until he came to, quite a spell later, strangling on a fiery hot liquid gurgling out of a bottleneck somebody had forced between his teeth. There was a strong, spicy, medicinal smell in his nostrils that brought tears to his eyes and jolted him out of his daze. He gulped, coughed, blinked and began to swear.

"Hey—hey!" he sputtered. "What the hell you tryin' to do—strangle me?"

The anxious face of Dr. Polk Rankin bending over him broke into a quick, relieved grin.

"Rankin's Wonderful Elixir of Life!" he chuckled with satisfaction. "Good for man or beast, internally or externally! How you feel, sonny?"

"Like hell with the lid on!" grunted Brian, and sat up. He groaned as pain stabbed through his head. The exploring hand that found a bump behind his ear came away with more Wonderful Elixir of Life than blood on it.

"I see you're one of them silent sufferers," grinned the little horse-doctor. "Want another swallow?"

"Not if I was dyin'!" said Brian. A sudden anxiety showed in his eyes. "Where's Tim?"

"He went along with Big Prince. While the old fool pot-gut was kickin' himself loose from the wagon, Tim cut your rope free and got his own on him; and when Prince took out again, Tim and his horse went sailin' along with him."

"The young idiot!" Brian scrambled groggily to his feet. "He'll get himself killed. He doesn't know anythin' about ridin' a horse, much less stoppin' a runaway!"

"Good time to learn," said Polk Rankin. "You quit worryin'. Prince ain't got the wind to run far like them wild mares. Last I see of 'em, Tim was ridin' along easy, mostly givin' Prince his head, probably figurin' to let the old fool wear himself out till he's ready to be led back." He paused to pull a bottle out of his pocket. "Here, take a swig of this. Confidentially, this is my personal de luxe quality!"

Brian held the bottle to his nose. It smelled pleasantly alcoholic. He took a long swig that warmed him clear to his toes.

"Thanks, Doc. I'm goin' after Tim. He may need help."

LIKE HIMSELF, Brian's horse was bruised but able to go. He reset the saddle, climbed on and struck out. As long as the big stud had stayed in the old road where the sod had never grown back entirely, the tracks were easy to follow. But when they turned out over a low

ridge and down another rocky canyon, he had to get off and lead his horse in order to follow them. Evidently Big Prince had lost the direct trail of the wild mares, but was stubbornly determined to follow them anyway.

At the bottom of the dry canyon, where summer rains had gullied it, bare dirt again showed the tracks of Big Prince and Tim's horse. Here, even to an inexperienced tracker, it looked as if both had slowed to a walk. That surely should mean that Tim had the stud pretty well under control, and he should either overtake them or meet them coming back pretty soon.

As the canyon spread into grassy patches, wide-horned cattle wearing the big Ramhorn brand put up their heads at sight of him. A horse nickered somewhere far down the draw. Because it sounded like Big Prince, Brian took out down the canyon at a hurried lope.

That was why he failed to notice where the stud had followed an aspen bench cowtrail instead of the canyon for some distance, and that other horse tracks mingled with the stud's where he came off the same bench back into the draw.

What he did notice, just after bursting through a tight squeeze of scrub oak brush was a quirt lying beside the trail, and on sudden impulse he leaned down to pick it up. It was a worn cowboy's quirt, intricately braided in a pattern of light and dark leathers. It had not been lying there long, for the tender grass under it was green and unfaded, the quirt itself unweathered and supple. He noted the broken wrist strap and started to hang the whip on an aspen limb where it could be seen if the owner should come back for it; then he changed his mind and carried it along with him.

Half a mile farther on he came suddenly in sight of the big stud grazing quietly at the edge of an aspen thicket. Tim's horse was not in sight, and for a wondering moment Brian did not see Tim, either. Then the stud moved a step, and Brian saw a familiar, overall-clad body drag after him through the thick bunchgrass.

Brian used his spurs and got there quick. The stud's sides were caked with drying sweat, his flanks ganted. Tim's rope was still on his neck. As Brian stepped off his horse, he saw that the other end of the rope was caught in a tight tangle around Tim's left ankle. He knelt quickly beside the body, one shaky hand feeling for a pulse. But he knew it was no use: Tim was dead, and had been for more than a few minutes, apparently dragged to death by that rope tangled around his foot.

BRIAN'S impulse to swear choked on a throatful of shock, horror and heartache. The stallion gave the rope a tug, reaching for better grass, moving the body again. Swiftly Brian fumbled out his knife and cut the rope, then in a sudden fury reached for the Army Colt at his hip. But he did not draw it. The horse wasn't to blame.

Ignorant of ropes and riding though he was, Tim surely would never have let himself get tangled up in a rope like this. Even if he had, surely he could have got his hands on the rope and kept himself from getting yanked out of the saddle and dragged to death.

After laying Tim gently in the shade of an aspen, Brian grimly started backtracking Big Prince. As near as he could make out, for the last two or three hundred yards, at least, the stallion had been traveling at only a moderate walk. But further investigation would have to wait. Heartsick, Brian came back to begin the sad job of packing Tim's body on his horse.

At the sound of hoofs his hand dropped again to his gun. This time he drew it, in a swift, smooth arc, ready to shoot, then lowered it again without reholstering it as a girl came riding down out of the aspens, leading Tim's empty-saddled horse.

Lucita Broussard pulled up a few steps away. Brian heard her catch her breath in a sharp gasp.

"Is—is he hurt badly?"

The sergeant gave her a scornful, angry look. Without answering, he went on examining Tim's bloody head. One bruise behind the right ear seemed to have bled

considerably. The face, rubbed raw from dragging, was smeared with dirt and blood, evidently from his nose. The rest of his bruises didn't seem to have bled much.

Lucita Broussard stepped out of the saddle and came to stand beside him.

"Is he—this man—your brother?"

"He *was*," said Brian bitterly.

"I'm sorry." When Brian made no response, she went on after a moment: "I'll hurry back to the Ramhorn and get a wagon and men to help you."

Brian O'Tara looked at her with hard, angry eyes. "I want no help from the Ramhorn!"

She bit her lips. "Surely—you don't blame us—for this, do you?"

Brian opened his lips to tell her just what he did think, then grimly closed them. There was no use telling this girl that he had seen two unidentified cowboys drive wild mares down in front of the little doctor's wagon, evidently with the deliberate purpose of tantalizing the stallion and causing an accident. No use to tell her that he could not believe Tim's death had been purely accidental. No use telling her that he had seen her staring at the broken-looped quirt tied on his saddle and noticed a look of fright which she quickly covered up. No use saying any of these things to this daughter of René Broussard who doubtless knew, as he did, that he had not one scrap of actual proof with which to back up his bitter suspicions.

So he said nothing, and the girl did not repeat her question.

"Sergeant," she said quietly, "I found this horse running loose back yonder on the hill, with tied bridle reins still looped over the saddlehorn. The horse—is your brother's?"

Brian nodded. He could see no sign of blood or other evidence of foul play on Tim's saddle. He led the pony up to a handy position for lifting Tim's body into the saddle. At the smell of blood the horse spooked and shied away.

"I'll help you. We'd better blindfold the pony. I've got an extra rope, too!"

Silently Brian accepted her advice, her help and her rope, admitting to himself that not only in blindfolding the horse with her buckskin jacket but even when it came to balancing Tim's body across the saddle and tying it on, this slip of a girl knew better than he just how to get the job done. When they had finished, he found that he could not let his hot anger at any and everybody connected with the Ramhorn keep him from thanking her.

She eyed him gravely. "I wish—" Then she stopped.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Nothing." She had taken a step nearer him. "Only this: please believe me—I'm terribly sorry. And I wish you could believe my father had nothing to do with this. He's claiming the land those farmers think they have a right to buy because he honestly believes it's his!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Brian O'Tara, in a carefully polite, hostile voice, and turned to go.

IN SILENCE Lucita watched him ride up the trail which she had told him would be an easier way back to the farmer camp on Vernal Creek than the way he had come, leading the stud and Tim's horse with its lifeless burden. About the trail he had taken her word—without thanks. Now a strange small core of pique mingled disturbingly with her genuine distress. She was used to attention and admiration from men—sometimes, she knew, because she was the daughter of Baron Broussard, more often because she was young and lovely. This was the first time any man, especially a young one, had ever looked at her with the kind of cold, hostile contempt he might have shown another man whom he neither liked nor trusted.

She waited a few minutes, then got on her horse. She squinted at the lowering sun and saw that she still had some time until dark. Leading her pony, she began a tedious job of backtracking, her eyes scanning the ground as she walked.

Because he had no son to side him, René Broussard had taught Lucita to ride as soon as she could walk. In the days when

he was very young, with the itch of untamed wildness in his veins, Broussard had been one of Kit Carson's mountain men, and he had passed on a lot of his woods lore to the eager mind of his young daughter.

To Lucita, as she worked it out, the track story soon began to unfold as plainly as if it had been written in words. She made out the hoofprints of unshod, running horses, the huge, unmistakable track of the big stallion, and a trail of disturbed grass, rocks and twigs obviously made by a dragged body.

On an old cow trail on an aspen bench—the one Brian had missed in his hurry down the canyon—she came to the end of her search, with a feeling like a chunk of lead lodged at the pit of her stomach—for here was where it had happened. Here was where the body had started dragging, here the grass was considerably trampled, and here, she found the tracks of other shod horses—two of them, she thought. Here hoofprints had churned up the dirt as if in some sort of ruckus. And here, at one spot, she found gummy smears of drying blood on the bunchgrass.

When she backtracked the big brown stud farther, she found he had been traveling at a walk, seemingly not possibly fast enough to have dragged a man from the saddle.

Heartsick, she went back. Deliberately she brushed out the tracks with a branch of aspen, then made new ones, leading her horse around several times, and adding a good measure of her own small boot prints. There would be heavy dew tonight, and where the grass had been crushed and bruised, by morning the sign would be hard to read. Even if any of the farmers had eyes as trail-wise as her father's, she hoped she was fogging up the evidence so that its meaning could not be read for sure. She thought she was doing what was right.

Timothy O'Tara was already dead. Nothing could be done for him, now, but if others found out he had been murdered, it would lead to other killings.

She got on her horse and headed for home at a swift lope. She would tell her father what she had seen, and what she had done.

Her trust in him had always been complete. He would take prompt steps to find out which of the Ramhorn crew were guilty, and would see that they were punished, but not through lawless revenge by Tim O'Tara's friends or brother.

Her father was out at the corrals talking to Casey Hancock and a wizened, slant-eyed little puncher called Ace Bullock, whom Lucita had never liked. Casey jumped to take her horse as she stepped out of the saddle. Her father smiled at her.

"You're all in a lather, *chérie*. Been riding hard?"

Lucita gathered her worried wits and tried to smile. The things she wanted to tell her father couldn't be said in front of Casey and Ace. "I'm late. I'm supposed to be going to a dance tonight with the captain."

"Well, don't worry. It won't hurt to keep Captain Grayson waiting."

Lucita looked through the pole fence of the horse corrals and noted they were empty except for two sweat-streaked horses in one of them. There were two saddles on the fence that had not yet been racked in the shed. She noticed with unhappy eyes that there was no quirt hanging from either saddlehorn, and that neither Casey nor Ace was carrying one.

"Papa," she made the question sound casual, "where are those range mares you had in here yesterday?"

SHE LOOKED BACK at her father in time to catch the quick warning glance that passed between him and Casey Hancock—and it was like receiving a heavy, hard blow to the heart.

Casey answered her: "Pablo got careless and left the gate open this morning and they hightailed it for the high country. Pablo ain't worth his salt, Rainy. Wish you'd let me fire him."

Before her father could answer and the subject be successfully changed, Lucita cut in.

"They were here when I left around noon, Casey. And the gate was shut."

"That so?" said Casey without much apparent interest. "I reckon I must have figured it wrong."

Lucita took a deep breath, hesitated, then went to the house.

Her mother, in black silk, high-heeled slippers on her tiny feet, was waiting in the living room. Luz Vallejo had been a beautiful girl; now she was a fat, middle-aged woman, but there was still beauty in her gentle, wise eyes, despite the dark circles that hinted strongly at poor health.

"You look tired, *chica,*" she said softly.

Suddenly the air of comfort and luxury, even her mother's gentleness, hit Lucita with a second hard blow, as she remembered the rock canyon she had recently left, and the straight-shouldered, black-haired sergeant with grieved, angry eyes as he bent over the dead body of his brother.

Her face turned white. "Mama—I have a headache. Will you tell Captain Grayson I don't feel well enough to go to the dance?"

Mrs. Broussard was wise enough to perceive that something besides physical sickness caused the panicky desperation in the girl's eyes.

She said quietly: "Of course I will make your excuses to Captain Grayson. Run along to bed, *chica.* I will be up to see you after a while."

She waited, listening to the girl's quick steps running up the stairs. Then, moving her heavy bulk a little uncertainly on the tiny high-heeled slippers, she went outside, through the high-walled, flower fragrant patio, and started across to the corrals, where she saw her husband talking to Casey Hancock.

It wasn't often that Luz Broussard ventured out afoot beyond her own patio, and seeing her, her husband hurried to meet her, Casey Hancock trailing a few feet behind.

"What is it, Luz? Something wrong?"

"Were you riding with Lucita today?"

"No. Why?"

"She came in looking very upset. Lucita is not easily frightened."

Luz Broussard heard her husband catch his breath sharply. Casey Hancock said something profane under his breath. The two men exchanged swift, uneasy glances.

"What is it, René?"

Her husband put a gentle hand on her arm. "Nothing for you to worry about, my dear. I'll talk to Lucita."

Reluctantly Luz let herself be steered back to the house, recognizing another of those times when women were not supposed to inquire too closely into the affairs of men.

AS HE RODE wearily back to the Ledbetter camp on Vernal Creek, Sergeant O'Tara thought too much, and unwillingly, of the vivid girl, Lucita Broussard. He thought of her delicate, lovely face, the small, brown hands that had been so much swifter and surer than his at the task of tying a dead weight across a saddle. He thought of her against his will, and even through the heartache of losing his beloved younger brother. He was still thinking of her around the campfire that night, while he helped Dora Ledbetter clean up the supper dishes.

Dora's round face had shown honest grief at sight of Tim O'Tara's dead body, but she hadn't cried. She was the kind, Brian thought approvingly, who would shed her tears in the privacy of her own pillow, but who could turn a calm face to the world as long as there was work to be done. Dora would have made Tim a good wife. She would have put down strong, sound roots in the good black earth that Tim had loved.

They buried Tim the next day, on a little rise that looked down on the spot he had picked to build his cabin. They wrapped him in one of Mrs. Ledbetter's clean quilts, for as yet they had no lumber for a coffin. Polk Rankin spoke briefly, and Brian O'Tara found it hard to hold back hot tears as he listened to the little doctor's simple words.

Later, after they had covered the grave, they walked back to camp, the women a little ahead, the men following more slowly as they talked. Mark Ledbetter spoke

gravely, waving his hand toward the freshly surveyed land.

"What you fix to do now? You want to sell this place back?"

"I'll keep it," said Brian. "If only to prove to René Broussard that I can!"

Ledbetter nodded. "Good. We'll help you with the crops—putting the house up."

Brian shook his head. "Not this summer. I can't get out of the army right away, and I won't be able to spend much time here until I am out. Maybe none."

"But for the winter you will need a house!"

"There'll be time enough later to throw up some sort of shack. I won't need much."

Ledbetter nodded again. "Just the same, we put the crops in," he said again, in a placid, firm voice. "Soon there will be more farmers. We put the house up, too, For such things are neighbors."

"No, you'll have plenty to do yourself this summer. Just keep an eye on it for me."

Ledbetter smiled. He took out a corn cob pipe, filled and lighted it without answering.

Brian O'Tara hesitated. Now that the women were out of hearing was the time to warn the men of danger, perhaps voice his own suspicions of the way Tim had died. Or should he? An ugly suspicion was not enough on which to buck the big Ramhorn outfit, not enough to trigger off a deadly range war. His course of action would be his own business, but perhaps he had no right to involve these people in it, especially since he wasn't sure that Tim had been deliberately killed.

LEDBETTER went on gravely, as if he had guessed what the soldier was thinking.

"There will be many more families here pretty soon. Some already signed up and paid their money. When they come we will elect leaders, men of patience and wisdom. You can never tell for sure what is in a man's heart on first meeting—but I think this man Broussard is not bad."

Polk Rankin cocked his head sideways, looking up at Brian like a wise chipmunk.

"I saw those men drive the mares down, I can guess what you are thinkin', boy."

"Timmy was murdered," said Brian.

"You got any proof? You know who done it?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be here now."

"Then wait a while longer. Go back to the army and finish out your time. Murder—like other scummy things—has a habit of finally floating to the top. Us farmers ain't fools. Mark here, is a plain man—but there's a lot of good sense in that round German head of his."

Brian put out his hand to the little doctor. "Thanks, Doc. I'll be goin' now. I've already overstayed my leave an' the captain's a touchy man about discipline."

But in spite of being overdue at the Fort, and the doctor's advice of caution, he turned his horse toward the canyon where the "accident" had occurred the day before. He wasn't much of a hand at reading outdoor tracks and sign, but he might find something there that would make up his mind one way or the other.

It was all he could do for Tim—now. Bitterly and cold-bloodedly he thought that. Hot-headed Irish he had been in the past, but now he didn't intend to go riding into Ramhorn headquarters and try jumping out a whole crew of rough and tough riders. That would get him nothing but a bullet in the gizzard. Patience was a hard lesson, but it was one that could be learned. When he knew for sure, it would be different.

He rode at a fast trot, anxious to get at what might be the first step in the long, grim program he had set himself. When he neared the scene of the accident he took it afoot. Presently he tied his horse while he cut a slow, wide circle, once around, then again, a smaller circle.

He studied the amazing number of very small boot tracks and the tromping of No. 1 horseshoes. Inexperienced tracker though he was, he couldn't fail to see that they seemed to almost entirely smear out other horse tracks, and that for a considerable distance completely trampled out the trail of the big-footed Belgian stud.

That meant that instead of heading back toward the Ramhorn after he left her, Lucita had ridden up here. For one small girl, she had certainly left a lot of tracks.

Brian swore in futile self-disgust. There had been some sort of trail evidence here if, in his grief, he had the sense to come looking for it, instead of taking the easier trail Lucita had told him of. Now the girl had destroyed it.

His lips tight with anger, he got back on his horse. He wasn't the only man who had ever been betrayed by a pair of lovely blue eyes, but he was one man who would not be so fooled again.

Now, hate it as he might, he was due back at Fort Grayson. The thought of going temporarily A.W.O.L. was tempting, but he knew Captain Grayson would have the whole garrison after him within twenty-four hours. He certainly couldn't make any headway running down his brother's killers while dodging a bunch of hard-riding soldiers.

There was nothing to do now but go back to the fort and bide his time as patiently as he could until his discharge came through. That shouldn't be long, he hoped.

CAPTAIN GRAYSON kept the young sergeant standing at attention for a good ten minutes while he carefully looked over some reports on his desk. When he laid down the papers and turned, his eyes were hard.

"Lieutenant Blanding informs me, Sergeant O'Tara, that you were granted a pass during my absence."

There was no open criticism of the lieutenant's action in the captain's words, but disapproval was certainly implied in his tone.

"Yes, sir," said O'Tara.

"And you have returned twenty hours late?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any excuse?"

"I buried my brother yesterday afternoon, Captain Grayson."

The captain's eyes wore a surprised look for an instant.

"I didn't know you had a brother near here."

"He came in with a group of farmers to settle on Vernal Creek, sir."

The captain frowned. "Do I understand he was one of those illegal squatters on Ramhorn property?"

Brian's back got stiffer. "He and I *bought* a tract of land, sir!"

"You did that, knowing my position—the army's position—with regard to these land grabbers?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Brian coolly, "we bought the land believing that any question of title would eventually be settled in the courts—not by you or the army."

Captain Grayson stood up abruptly. "You will be confined to the fort for another thirty days, O'Tara, for over-staying leave and for impudence."

"Yes, sir."

"There will be no more leaves for you to spend playing at farming in trespass on Mr. Broussard's property!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Today you will begin a program of swamping out the barracks. Sergeant Foley will assign three men to help you, under Corporal Linotti's direction. Floors, ceilings, and all woodwork must be scrubbed with disinfectant. Blankets taken down to the stream and washed. New ticks put on the bunks. Walls whitewashed. In addition, for yourself only, squad drill every afternoon between the hours of two and four."

"Yes, sir."

Just outside the captain's office Sam Foley was waiting. He fell into step beside Brian.

"I hear you're on Purification Police this week," he grinned.

"News gets around fast."

"Under the orders of a mere corporal! Tsk, tsk!"

For once Foley's ribbing got no comeback, not even the usual O'Tara grin. But it was not the disgrace of taking orders from a corporal that kept the Irish sergeant silent.

Grinning happily, Foley escorted Brian to the quartermaster depot where Corporal Linotti already had three guardhouse inmates assembling soap, buckets, mops, and similar equipment.

"I do hope you clean out the corners good," Sam Foley went on, imitating the precise clipped voice of Captain Grayson. "You can always tell a good housekeeper by the manner in which he infulgates the corners, Sergeant O'Tara."

"Go to hell!" said Brian.

"And be sure you get nice fresh straw for my bunk, Briney, dear. You know how fussy I am about my nocturnal couch!"

"Leave it to me an' you know where I'll get the straw," said Brian.

"Of course," said Sam, "I won't be here to inspect it myself."

"Where you goin'?"

Sergeant Foley grinned happily. "Los Vernales! I rate all the hot stuff, boy!"

"How come you're goin' over there in the middle of the week, fancy-pants?"

"The captain's detailin' me in command of three men to stay there for a week. He's also sending Blanding and eight men to White Rock for a week. Figures there's a chance of some trouble or rioting when more of you farmers start movin' in."

Brian understood now the reason for Foley's ribbing and for his bubbling good humor. There were other soldierly pastimes available in Los Vernales besides drinking and gambling.

"You big dumb ox! No wonder you never got no higher than sergeant!"

Sam Foley laughed. "Look who's talkin'! Five gets you ten that you're back to private yourself inside a month!"

"Inside of a month," said Brian, hardly believing it himself, "I'll be thumbin' my nose at the army."

"Like a cat up a tree," said Foley. "Y'know the Captain used to partake of the joys of Los Vernales himself now and then, before he switched his operations to the Ramhorn."

A wave of unreasoning anger rose up in Brian O'Tara. "Shut up—before I splatter your teeth all over your face!"

Sam Foley's jaw dropped with surprise. The offended look of a kicked puppy came into his eyes. He turned and walked away.

BRIAN let him go without apology or explanation, the anger still seething senselessly inside him. It was no business of his if the captain had once made a habit of going to Los Vernales, or if he still did or didn't. He called the captain a bad name under his breath, and shouldered a mop with such vigor that it slapped Corporal Linotti in the face.

"Hey, now!" the corporal admonished him. "Take it easy, Sarge! I never asked for this job of warpin' the hell out of you. There's some of us don't love Grayson no better than you do!"

"Sure, I know, Corp," said O'Tara apologetically. "I'll do as much for you."

That was more like it. Corporal Linotti acknowledged the apology with a comradely whack on O'Tara's shoulder, for they both knew there was hardly a soldier in the fort, the corporal included, who wouldn't crawl through cactus, if necessary, to oblige Sergeant O'Tara. . . .

Los Vernales, just five miles away over Mile-Away Mesa and down the river, had once been just another pleasant little Mexican *placita*. But with the building of the fort out on lonely mesa land, thirty miles from the nearest sizeable town of White Rock, there had been some changes.

Now there was a long two-storied adobe building politely called the Hotel Valle Grande. A man *could* get just a bed there, but there were also other frills that could be arranged for.

Across the street from the hotel was another long building. This was a drab saloon and gambling hall on weekdays, but for week ends old Bobo Ortega hauled a buckboard load of painted dancehall girls out from White Rock to entertain his cavalrymen customers.

But in spite of these changes, on the days when soldiers from Fort Grayson weren't there on the loose—Los Vernales still seemed like just another slumbrous little New Mexico *placita*.

Captain Aubrey Grayson, post commander now for two years, had a passion for neatness, and also for economy. As long as he had soldiers sitting around with no wars to fight, there was no use hiring civilian labor to keep the place neat. Purification Police duty, as Sergeant Foley had called it, also served handily for disciplinary punishment, for no true cavalryman, O'Tara included, has ever enjoyed housecleaning.

On this occasion, after all quarters and warehouses, even those no longer used, had been cleaned, scrubbed and freshly whitewashed, Sergeant O'Tara found himself swamping out stables, cutting new oak posts and poles for horse corrals, and digging post holes till blisters rose in his palms, and sore impatience in his soul.

During those weeks he saw Lucita Broussard several times. She was a friend of the wife of young Lieutenant Blanding, and the two girls often rode together, sometimes in a buggy, sometimes on horseback.

Whenever Brian's trail crossed hers, which was too often for his own peace of mind, the girl spoke to him, as she did to many other soldiers. Once, finding him alone out by the corrals setting new posts, she reined up for a moment.

"I rode down Vernal Creek the other day, Sergeant O'Tara," she said, her tone quiet and friendly. "They were starting to build you a cabin."

"Yes, ma'am," said Brian and went on digging.

"The Ledbetters seem like very nice people."

"Yes, ma'am," said Brian again, without looking up.

She didn't say anything then for a moment, but Brian was sharply aware that her horse hadn't moved on. Finally he looked up.

"I'm sorry you feel the way you do."

His eyes were cold. "I went back the morning after Tim was killed. I saw how you'd messed up all the tracks. Why?"

She stared at him with a slowly whitening face. She started to speak, gulped, then said slowly: "That is something I couldn't explain. You could never understand."

"No," said Brian harshly. "I don't think I could."

She rode on then to the cottage where the Blandings lived.

IT WAS NEWS to Brian that the Ledbetters and Rankin were building him a cabin, but not much of a surprise. They were that kind of folks. He had not seen any of them since his return to the fort, although he had had one brief note from the doctor.

There were only four more new families on Vernal Creek, for the news that Broussard was making claim to the land was scaring more timid homeseekers off. Several wagonloads came, looked, listened, and moved on to seek less disputed claims elsewhere.

Captain Grayson was spending a lot of time in White Rock these days, apparently doing his best to discourage new settlers before they paid their money.

Lawyer John Caton and the other shareholders in the land company were considerably irked by what they considered uncalled-for interference in local affairs by the military, but although they still kept their office open, ready to sell land to anybody who wanted to buy, they nevertheless followed, on Caton's advice, a policy of caution. Aligned with René Broussard by both politics and long friendship, the sheriff and district attorney had refused to consider Tim O'Tara's death anything but an accident.

In White Rock County the baron had long been esteemed by most as an honorable man as well as a generous and benevolent *patrón*. His claim to the Vernal Creek tract had come as a surprise to Lawyer Caton and his associates. In effect, what Caton now told the settlers was this: "Titles to land we've sold you are good, and in due time will be so proven in a court of law. Against an influential man like Broussard we must take time to prepare an airtight case. This we are now doing. Meantime, hang on—but, if possible, without provoking any of the Ramhorn people to violence."

It was a cautious, perhaps even a timid policy of wait and watch, but for the time

being it seemed to be working. At least no news of further molestation of the settlers by Ramhorn riders since Tim's accident reached Sergeant O'Tara's ears at the fort.

Meantime Brian chafed at his restriction to the fort at a time when he could see no need for it except the small-minded malice of Captain Grayson.

But although it went against his free and easy Irish pride to do so, he was careful to walk softly and to obey all orders without question. He worked even harder than he had to, for when he was tired enough, it kept hate from festering in his heart; it kept him from brooding too much on Tim's death; and every day brought the time for his discharge nearer.

So the month passed. The fort had been thoroughly cleaned and fumigated. For a time, at least, the bunks were even free of bedbugs.

If Captain Grayson was pleased, he kept it to himself. He was a strict disciplinarian who didn't believe in spoiling soldiers with praise. But he didn't deprive Sergeant O'Tara of his stripes, and somehow Sam Foley did manage to wangle out of him a Saturday-afternoon pass for O'Tara to attend the annual fiesta day in Los Vernales. . . .

It was late July and the day was hot. The wind swirled around the massive adobe buildings of the little *placita*, kicking up stinging bits of fine, red sand.

Through the open door of the Cantina Alegre, Brian O'Tara saw the hastily outthrust boot toe, he saw the big farmer stumble on it and barely catch himself from falling. He heard Mark Ledbetter's booming, good-natured laugh.

"By damn, cowboy, you should have it big feet like mine! Then a man could see where he should not step!"

Several onlookers laughed, but Casey Hancock didn't. His drawl was openly hostile: "I'm mighty particular who steps on my toes, sodbuster!"

Ledbetter laughed again, but this time it sounded less good natured.

"You make joke—no?"

"I ain't laughin'!" said Casey Hancock.

Brian O'Tara had heard and watched the milling crowd outside with a sour eye. There were several Ramhorn cowboys in it, and he had a feeling that the makings of a first-rate brawl was brewing out there. He had begun to sense it from the first instant several wagonloads of farmer folks had hitched at the edge of the plaza.

They had come in friendliness, wanting to be neighborly with these people of Baron Broussard's domain, and they would be slow to take offense; but there was a limit to what any man of pride could take.

But if there was a brawl he would be in it, and for a moment he wished he hadn't come. A fight just now, with him aligned on the side of the Vernal Creek farmers, and there was no telling what kind of further punishment the malice of Captain Grayson might dream up, nor how much longer the captain might delay his discharge papers.

He turned back to the bar, and with a sort of fatalistic Irish philosophy, downed a couple of shots of Bobo Ortega's bad whisky, on the theory that if he was going to fight he might as well get in the mood to enjoy it. He gave the liquor a moment to begin percolating, then took a hitch in his belt that settled the blue uniform more snugly over his lean hips, shoved the blue cap to the back of his crisply curling black hair, and strode outside.

Here in this dusty village, any minute now, something like all hell was due to bust loose, and he wanted no part of it. But these Vernal Creek sodbusters had been his brother Tim's friends. Whatever the odds, whatever the cost to his own plans, they'd find him fighting at their side—to the death, if need be.

TODAY was the fiesta of San José, patron saint of Los Vernales. The plaza was full of people, black-hatted, dark-skinned *paisanos* and a sprinkling of Anglos leaned or squatted against adobe walls in groups, talking. Black-shawled Spanish-American women passed the time of day with fair skinned neighbors from some of the small nearby ranches. A dozen or so Ramhorn cowboys, some Mexican,

some Anglos, and a goodly sprinkling of blue-uniformed soldiers from the fort, including Sergeant Sam Foley, milled about. On one side of the plaza half a dozen sunbonneted Vernal Creek farm women were keeping to themselves on spring wagon seats which their men had set under the shade of a cottonwood tree. Some of their menfolk were trying to be friendly with native *paisanos* and mostly getting the cold shoulder.

For word had gotten around that Don René and Doña Luz looked with disfavor on these newcomers, and to the people who had lived all their lives in the shadow of the big grant, Doña Luz Vallejo de Broussard was something halfway between royalty and an angel.

If trouble didn't break out first, in a few minutes a door on the street would open, and a troupe of musicians, one little girl clad in white, a man costumed like a bull, and half a dozen other masked dancers would come out to perform the traditional "Dance of Los Matachines."

As Brian stepped outside, two fiddlers and two *guitaristas* lined up against the wall and began playing. But before the dancers could take their places for the dance, a black surrey whirled up from the river road, and turned into the plaza. Its passengers were a fat señora with a sweet face, and black lace mantilla over her hair, the other a slender, lovely, dark haired señorita in dark red silk.

Several men sprang to the horses' heads, others stretched up willing hands to help the ladies down.

Brian O'Tara had moved to stand near Mark Ledbetter. As she stepped from the carriage, Lucita's eyes met his for an instant, and the smile on her lips abruptly faded.

Black shawled women crowded around her and her mother.

"Bienvenidas, señora y señorita! Como les va?"

Their progress toward the *Matachines* was slow, Luz Broussard walking with mincing steps on tiny feet, pausing with a smile and a handshake for everyone.

Chairs draped with bright Chimayo blankets were placed against the wall for the two women. The *mùsicos* began playing again, and *Los Matachines* began their dance.

Brian O'Tara felt a hand touch his arm, and turned to look down into Dora Ledbetter's round, smiling face. Dora was looking pretty today, dressed in bright blue calico. The warmth of the day had brought a rosy flush to her cheeks, and tiny beads of perspiration glinted on the soft, golden down on her upper lip.

Brian said quickly: "You'd better stay back with the other women, Dora. This crowd looks rough."

As she turned to go, Casey Hancock stepped to her side and put his hand on her arm. There was a gleam of something more than innocent mischief in his eyes. Little Ace Bullock grinned and slouched up beside him.

"A new gal, eh? An' a plumb purty one!" Casey said, as if he had never seen her before. "Plump an' meaty like I like 'em!"

His tone and the too-familiar hold on her arm implied that he thought her one of Bobo Ortega's spangled, painted girls. Ace Bullock firmly took hold of her other arm.

Even Dora understood that an insult was intended. Her face turned red, then one good strong arm swung up and slapped the cowboy hard on his tanned cheek.

Brian O'Tara pulled her away, and gave her a shove.

"Get back, Dora!"

Mark Ledbetter gave a bellow of rage. Brian saw the big farmer's right fist swing hard enough to down a horse. Casey Hancock, with a grin of derision, sidestepped the haymaker. His own fist clipped Ledbetter on the chin. The big German crowded him, and took another blow on the nose that brought blood gushing, before his bear-like arms clamped around the cowboy like a vise.

The two men swayed there for a moment, then both crashed to the ground, Ledbetter on top.

ACE BULLOCK circled them, looking for a chance to kick Mark Ledbetter in the head, and Brian O'Tara knocked him down. From down the street Polk Rankin came on the run, and from the other direction Sergeant Sam Foley launched a wild Apache yell and knocked down the first Ramhorn cowboy he came to.

After that it was a wild, unreasoning fight. Every man there picked his side and waded in. Mingled with the shouts, grunts and curses of the men, Brian heard the shrill screams of women and the frightened crying of children.

Other partisans of the Ramhorn sprang to attack the black-haired sergeant. He took some hard wallops, but in the meantime knocked three men down. He caught the flashing glint of sunlight on a raised knife and whirled to meet it. His fist knocked the knife wielder down, but not before the blade ripped cloth and some meat on his left arm.

From behind, a pistol butt cracked down on his head. He staggered, and half a dozen hands tugged him down. For a dazed moment more, sprawled on his back, he kicked and fisted them off. Then somebody kicked him in the head. He saw dazzling, whirling lights, and for a moment knew nothing, then became dimly aware of a woman's sharp commands.

At the words in quick, sharp Spanish, fists stopped swinging, flat, worn shoes shuffled back. The prestige of Doña Luz Broussard had stopped the fight.

Lucita Broussard pushed her way forward to drop to one knee beside Sergeant O'Tara, heedless of dust soiling her silk dress. "Are you hurt, Sergeant?"

Brian wiped dripping blood from his nose and got to his feet without help.

"I reckon I'll live," he said dryly, and turned his back on her.

He saw with a grim satisfaction that there were others wiping noses, too. A dozen feet away Lucita's mother knelt beside a still figure in cowboy boots. Over by his wagon big Mark Ledbetter sat holding his head in his hands. His shirt had been torn from his back, and Polk Rankin was swabbing a knife cut across his shoulder, using the brownish contents of a familiar bottle. A couple of Ramhorn vaqueros were helping Casey Hancock to his feet. It had been quite a fight.

Pudgy Bobo Ortega had stayed safely inside his saloon until the fight was over. He came out now, the town constable's star bobbling importantly on his fancy vest.

Luz Broussard motioned him to her. "Ace Bullock is dead, I think."

As she spoke, Dona Luz rose to her feet, tottered, and would have fallen if quick hands had not caught her. Two of those hands belonged to Sergeant Brian O'Tara. There was a look of pain on the señora's face when Brian and a Ramhorn vaquero eased her into a chair, but her black eyes flashed fire when Bobo Ortega came bowing to inquire if the *señora* were ill.

"*Tonto!* Have I not told you there is a man dead there in the street? See to him at once!"

"*Si! Si, señora!* Queeck I make some investigate!"

Brian was aware of a low murmur in the crowd, partly anger, partly shock, as Bobo waved them back from around the dead man with an imperious hand. He was also aware of a small hand on his arm as he started back out into the street.

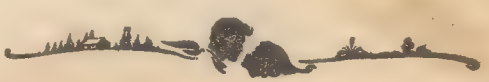
"My mother wishes me to thank you," Lucita Broussard said quietly. "And she hopes you are not badly hurt!"

"Tell her not as bad," Brian said without stopping, "as my brother Tim was!"

He heard the girl's shocked gasp, and for a miserable moment wished he had kept his mouth shut. The dead cowboy out in the street was a man he had knocked down at the beginning of the fight, and he wanted now to find out, if he could, just what had killed him.

Then he saw, with relief, that it was no blow of a fist that had killed Ace Bullock. He lay face down in the dust, with a knife buried under his left shoulder blade.

(To be continued in the next issue)



He went out, feeling the depth of his misery

Wedding Gift

By Alice Axtell

THIS WAS his wedding day, and he left the snug cabin on the upper fork of Willow Creek early, with a feeling of awe, as though it were a day of miracles. He could believe in them now.

The feeling persisted even as he passed the trail that led back to the big Bar V and came unexpectedly on Sid Veach, sitting his fine bay beside the road, and obviously waiting for him to pass.

♥

WHAT COULD Dottie and Ben expect from a man who hated them as much as Veach did?

Veach's smile was wintry. "Well, Hammond, so you and Dottie are getting married today."

Ben Hammond looked away, knowing why Veach's smile was so bitter. "I'm right sorry, Sid," he said awkwardly. "Not that Dottie picked me—but I know how you feel. Know how I'd feel if it'd been the other way round."

"I wanted Dottie to have the best." Veach's face twisted, flushed, and his voice rose. "The best of everything. She deserves it; she ought to have everything she wants."

Ben nodded in agreement. It was part of the wonder and glory of the day that Dottie Crippen, who could have had Sid Veach and the Bar V and all that money could buy, had instead picked him and the cabin on the upper fork of Willow Creek and the long, hard years ahead.

Veach's bitter smile returned. "Well, can't keep a man on his wedding day. I meant to come, but I'm missing a cow and her calf, The old red roan. Haven't seen her, have you?"

Ben shook his head, recalling the cow and calf for their distinctive markings.

Veach lifted his reins. "Tell Dottie I'm going to give her a wedding gift." He hesitated, and his words were oddly emphasized. "I wanted her to have the best—I still do."

Ben looked after him, troubled. Veach's manner had been strange; and unexpected, too, had been his expressed intention to make them a wedding gift. Sid Veach had always been a poor loser.

Coming to the Crippen home, where the neighbors were already gathering, he joined old Gar Crippen, who would be his father-in-law after this day. He was startled by the outrage on the men's faces.

Amick, from across the valley, was doing most of the talking and his face was hard and angry. "I'm telling you, we can't call it an accident or bad luck no more. It's happened the same way too often. I've lost two cows now, and their calves are clean gone."

Ben listened, troubled, guessing what had happened.

Crippen muttered, "It's hard to believe. We've never had trouble of that kind here. Who would—"

He stopped and no one else said anything.

Then Amick said harshly. "Nobody wants to say it. I will. We've got a dirty, sneakin' cow thief livin' among us. One that's too big a coward to drive off a few head and take his chances. He's playin' it the safe way. Kill the cow an' take an unbranded calf, and who can prove it wasn't his when he's got it with his own?"

Ben asked quietly, "Was the cow shot, Amick?"

"It'd been mauled too bad by wolves before I found it to tell."

"Bear coulda done it."

"Then why didn't I find the calf?" Amick snarled. "Bear was what I thought the first time, but no more. This bear walks on two legs." A cold determination tightened the lines of his face. "If I ever get sight of him down a gunbarrel, he won't walk no further."

There was a growled murmur of assent through the group; then Amick tried to smile and said more cheerfully, "Sorry, Ben. I oughtn't to have brought that up on your wedding day."

Ben muttered, "I can't make up my mind to it that any man I know would do a thing like that."

Gar Crippen slapped him on the shoulder. "Ben, you'd believe good of a man if you caught him robbin' you. We better go in now, an' drop this talk, or the women'll be screechin' in our ears."

HIS WEDDING, with its happy confusion, its boisterous congratulations, its sense of awe and great joy, was over. Mr. and Mrs. Ben Hammond were on their way home, with clouds gathering high in the west in promise of a storm to end the day.

Amick, who had bought a few head of stock from a nester further on up the creek, rode up the narrow rutted road with them.

They passed the trail leading back to the Bar V, and Ben was reminded of Veach's search for his roan cow; and he

remembered the other talk of the day and was suddenly troubled and uneasy.

They came on Veach himself a few miles further on, and though Ben knew that they would have to meet many times through the years, somehow he wished it had not happened today.

Dottie smiled at him, radiant in her happiness, but Veach only nodded and touched his hat stiffly. He said wryly, "Well, I found my cow, but now I can't locate her calf."

Amick tured savage. "Another one, huh? Cow dead an' calf missing. Was the calf branded?"

Veach stared at him. "Why, no, I reckon not. Late spring calf; too late to get him this spring. I figured it was a bear."

Ben said quietly, "I'd like to look at her—I'd like to satisfy myself that it wasn't a bear."

Veach shrugged. "Well, she lays back there near that clump of oak, but—"

Dottie laughed at his significant glance at the darkening sky. "I'm neither sugar nor salt, to melt at a few drops of rain," she said gaily.

Ben rode across to the clump of oak, and on the far side found the carcass of the roan cow. Because big drops of rain were already falling he did not dismount for the close scrutiny he would otherwise have given it, but forced his snorting horse near enough for a good look, and felt his uneasiness lessen. The cow's neck apparently had been broken; he could see no sign of a bullet. It might well have been a bear that did the killing, though it must have been frightened off before it could devour any of the flesh.

He went back to the others, noticing how Amick had drawn Veach to one side and was arguing with him.

He said quietly, "It could have been bear. I won't go so far as to say for sure that it was, but it could have been. Must have happened last night, or real early this morning. If that's what it was, then he must have got scared off, and will likely be back tonight."

Amick retorted savagely, "Then why ain't her calf around?"

"If somebody's buildin' up his herd this way, why didn't he just shoot the cow?" Ben protested. "Up in this rough country there wasn't a chance anybody'd hear it."

"I don't know," Amick growled. "But I do know that if I—"

Veach interrupted sharply. "Forget it! One cow's no calamity, and we can't prove anything—not yet."

Amick turned on him. "Maybe it's no calamity to you—"

Ben nodded to Dottie and they left them and rode on. Close at hand now, the storm was gathering force, though the first few sprinkles had stopped. They rode fast, but even so, the girl seemed suddenly very quiet, and Ben studied her anxiously.

Inside the snug cabin, with a small fire built against the damp, Dottie caught his arm. "Ben, Sid Veach hates us. Did you know that?" Her eyes were wide and frightened. "I never told you, but I had a terrible scene with him when I told him I couldn't marry him. At first he couldn't—wouldn't—believe. Then he threatened. I'm almost afraid."

Ben drew her into his arms. "Now, honey," he comforted her. "I can see where Sid would be cut up when you turned him down—know how I'd feel. But you mustn't fret about what he said when he was sore. He wouldn't have promised to give us a wedding gift if he was holding any grudges."

"A wedding gift? From Sid? I can't believe it—he could never stand giving up anything he wanted."

"He told me so, himself, honey. Said he wanted you to have the best."

Then, unexpectedly, she was crying, her cheek pressed against his. "Oh, Ben, you always believe good of everyone—it's one of the reasons why I love you. Don't ever change, darling, don't ever change."

OUTSIDE, the storm broke, and rose to fury, and passed, leaving still an hour or two of daylight. Ben took down his rifle and explained, "I been thinking about Veach's cow. There's a good chance that it was a bear that killed her, and I'm going back and set a trap. If I

could get him, it'd maybe save a lot of trouble."

He took an ax as well as the rifle, and when he reached the dead cow, he cut a pair of stout timbers and set them V-shaped, and set the rifle so that it was aimed across the carcass, and then attached a cord from the trigger to the bait. It was simple and might not work, but there was a chance that it would.

In the morning he was awakened very early by the plaintive bawling of a calf. He dressed and slipped out of the cabin quietly, and rode out to see what was wrong.

What he found was the roan cow's calf, miserably tagging a few of his own cows and bawling wretchedly for its mother.

Wedding gift! His eyesight blurred, he swayed in the saddle as from a blow. This was Veach's wedding gift—to brand him as a thief. He had no doubt that the other missing calves were among his stock. Even if he returned them there would be those who would doubt, who would remember that Dottie had refused wealth for him and say that he was trying to make it the quick way, for her. Veach's best gift to Dottie was himself—Sid Veach.

Shame and gossip and even widowhood—for Dottie's wedding gift! Wrath swept over Ben, a burning, driving fury that he had never known. He went back to the cabin and buckled on the gunbelt and heavy gun that he seldom wore. He had forgotten his wife.

She called to him sleepily from the other room. "Ben, is that you?"

Ben answered hurriedly, with a sense of shock, "I'm—I've got some chores to do, Dottie. Don't hurry breakfast."

He went out, and as he did so he realized the full depth of his misery. If he went on, hunted up Veach, and killed him as he meant to do, he would lose Dottie—at least, her trust in him and faith in him.

Yet he kept on, head low, sick at heart, hot passion in his veins. What else could he do?

Coming to the road, Amick, driving, a half dozen cows ahead of him, hailed. "Say, come along. I'm goin' to give that cow of Veach's a look-over. He talked me out of it last night."

Ben's mouth twisted, remembering the trap he had set for a bear that never existed. "I was down last night and set a bear trap," he said. "But I guess I was wrong."

Yet when Amick, who was riding ahead, approached the clump of trees, he turned in the saddle and shouted, "So help me, you were right. There's something there."

Then they were where they could see the huddled dark object clearly. It was not a bear. Sid Veach lay dead, sprawled across the roan cow, the trigger cord to the rifle twisted around his foot. He had a gun in his hand, and there was a bullet mark on the animal's head that had not been there before.

Ben pointed to it finally. "He couldn't let well enough alone," he said dully. "He meant to hang it on me, on account of Dottie. He wouldn't let you look it over last night because he meant to come back the way he did. Then he'd say that I've lied about the bullet mark. It would make it just a little worse for me when those missin' calves were found in with my stock.

"I thought it was a bear, an' I set the trap. It got Veach."

He looked down at the dead man's face and the rage left him; he felt pity. "Amick, you better take charge of this. I'm going home."

His mount was already in motion and he did not look back.

The wedding gift that he most wanted was his after all.

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He snatched up the .44 as lead screamed past

The CAUTIOUS

A CAUTIOUS MAN has to change when he's

caught in a jam between four gunnies—and one gal

RAMROD

By FRANK P. CASTLE

TOM BARLOW followed the same procedure, the first day of every month—stopped work at noon, cleaned up, walked to the big house with the rest of the Lazy S punchers, and received his paycheck, filled out in Dad Segrist's crabbed writing. Today, he had a surprise. The amount had gone up. For the first time in his life, he was the possessor of more than a hundred dollars for a month's work.

He waited until the other punchers had filed out. Then, "Mighty white of you, Dad," he said. "I'm thankful."

"Know you are, son," Segrist said. "You've earned it. Come next fall, I'm thinking of turning the whole spread over to you to run, while I pay my daughter in California a long visit. As manager instead of ramrod, you'll draw even more."

For a moment, Tom had excited thoughts—including Amy Allen—of what being manager of Lazy S could mean. He deflated them soberly, as was his way. Time enough to speak to Amy when the better job, with its pay, was solidly in his grasp. Segrist studied him, shaking his white head.

"Tom, you do everything too danged cautious! What you need is a wife to put a prod under your coat, make you take chances! Well, bring one home; you can have the cottage my daughter lived in before her husband got that California job. Rent free! And you can start running some beef of your own, along with mine, on Agency grass."

Tom frowned. For a dozen years now Lazy S had used government graze in the Blue Smoke hills for deep summer graze. Segrist had rights, through usage, that a strong agent on the reservation ninety miles west would back up, if it came to any contest between Dad Segrist and another stockman ambitious to shove him aside. But there was a new agent on the reservation, one who had shown signs of wanting the job to pay off fast. And a man named Kellner had appeared who openly coveted the Agency grass, any way he could close his fists on it.

"We'll likely have trouble enough putting just Lazy S beef in the hills this year, with that fellow Kellner around," Tom warned. His boss snorted disdainfully.

"The devil with Kellner!" he said. "We'll use Agency graze again, as always. Now, Tom, pick yourself a girl and pop the question. The

one you danced with so much at Lodge Hall last month, maybe—mighty pretty filly, that gal!"

Tom felt his cheeks warm, and thought with pleasure of Amy Allen, wishing work had allowed him to see her more than two brief calls since the dance.

He had something more to say on the subject of Agency grass.

"Dad, when we hit town today, keep an eye peeled for Sid Kellner and that tough-nut named Hawthorne who's siding him," Tom said. "Stay wide of them until we can figure what they mean to do."

Segrist snorted again. "I'm not giving up an inch to such trash, in a town I helped build from a wide spot where two trails crossed. If they're fools enough to try taking grass that's mine by right—well, I've thrown lead at crooks before and I can do it again."

Tom frowned. Dad Segrist had turned definitely old and shaky, these last couple of years. His fighting days were behind him.

"Just take it easy, old-timer," Tom Barlow begged. "This is the first decent job I ever had; I don't want to look for another one, ever again!"

IN TRAIL BEND, Tom took his place in line at the bank, which stayed open late today to cash checks pouring in from all the outfits in the lee of the Blue Smokes. Trail Bend, Wyoming, was built around the two wide intersecting streets where Texas cattle, trailed in nearly two decades ago, had come up from the south along two different trails.

It was a good town, a place where Tom meant to live a long time and die with his boots off. At thirty, his drifting days were over and there was a solid future ahead of him—if Sid Kellner did not make good his threat to grab the Agency grass. Deprived of it, Lazy S would have to cut back. It would be just another small spread, scrabbling along, not much future of any kind ahead.

Tom saw Kellner himself, in the bank—a small, hawk-faced man with fierce, driving energy in his compact body, showing a derisive glitter in hooded eyes as he appraised this Lazy S foreman. No sign of Bus Hawthorne, the brutal flint-fist who was his shadow, but Tom knew he must be close by.

Tom felt a little cold. Kellner had appeared in Trail Bend only a week ago, openly saying he was going to move onto the Agency graze and telling how he would do it—a bribe to the reservation agent to stay neutral, fists and hot lead for Lazy S if it tried to stop him. And Kellner had the look of a man who meant exactly what he said.

Tom cashed his check and went out again, turning toward Grissom's store, pace quickening, warm anticipation in him. Amy Allen clerked there.

He found her—but not alone. Lee Chasen was there, leaning on a counter, talking in a chuckling undertone to the girl. She was flushed, trying to recapture her hand, which he held in both of his.

Tom paused a moment, then headed on, stiff-faced. Lee Chasen had been his best friend, once. There was still a bond between them, but also a widening gulf—inevitable, since he was now a foreman and Lee a puncher who worked only occasionally. Lee had several dodges for keeping in funds and well dressed—Tom was wearily familiar with one of them.

Amy said, "Why, Tom!" She jerked her hand away. Amy was small and slender; she had a freckled snub nose and a wealth of shining brown hair, and was comparatively new to Trail Bend. It was inevitable, Tom thought with a sinking feeling, that Lee should get around to courting her. About the only thing he really devoted serious effort to was women.

Lee showed a grin that held a touch of mockery. He had a smooth, handsome face, as compared with Tom's lantern jaw and big ears. "Just the one I want to see! Step over here a minute, Tom—"

He drew Tom Barlow to one side. Amy turned her back and began to shift boxes about on shelves.

Tom felt he knew well what was com-

ing. It had happened too many times before. And it chafed him that Lee should have the gall to try it again now. He shook his head angrily.

"Not this time!" Tom said. "I've talked hard to get you two jobs in the last month—and you quit both of them after only a couple of days! Lee, you're promoting no more loans from me—"

Then he stopped, remembering there was an extra twenty dollars in his pocket today. Tom sighed and brought it out.

"Well, this one last time—"

His voice trailed off. Lee was laughing at him, in an abrasive sort of amusement.

"Barlow, the tough ramrod!" he gibed. "Put that roll away and skip the usual sermon. I'm not borrowing this time, but paying back—every damned dime you've loaned me!"

TOM STARED in amazement. Lee produced a wad of bills. "Let's see—about a hundred in all, wasn't it?"

"I didn't keep track," Tom answered. He had never expected to see a cent of it again. "Lee, where did you get that much?"

"Not risking my neck at forty and found in any cheap puncher's job!" Lee said. "Never mind how—you'll find out quick enough. Here's your money." It took all his bills. "Hang onto it. Before long, you're going to need every buck you can raise to eat on!"

He lifted his hand in a farewell gesture to Amy, and swaggered away, arrogance in his stiff stride, the set of his shoulders.

Tom let the puzzle of his words go for now and turned to the girl. She gave him a belated smile—about the same sort of smile, he thought, as the sinking feeling in him increased, that she granted any customer. "Anything I can do for you, Tom?"

He forced a responsive grin. It had been a joke between them, before, when he came back here; lace, ribbons and women's fripperies were in her department. But somehow it didn't seem a joke today. He said, "Heard there's a social and supper at the church tonight; I'd like to take you."

Amy's brow ridged faintly. "You've waited too long to do your asking, Tom. I've already promised to go with someone else."

Lee? He supposed so, and feared to ask. Amy started shifting boxes again, perhaps a hint for him to move along. Her head was bent, eyes veiled—no telling what she was thinking. Tom remembered the kiss she had let him take when he had said good night, after that dance to which Dad Segrist had referred. He had relived the moment a hundred times in his thoughts. It looked as if Amy had found it less important. Town girls, Tom had heard, didn't attach much significance to kisses.

He grabbed hurriedly for a subject that would enable him to stick around a little longer, and blurted out the news of his raise.

Amy said, "Why, that's very pleasant news, Tom. And well deserved, of course; you've worked terribly hard."

Was there a barb in that comment, for a man who had devoted so much time to work, expecting to court a girl in what odd moments he could spare now and then, expecting her to stand around waiting for him?

He added what Dad Segrist had said about a trip to California, talking a little desperately now, bearing down hard on the fact he would get another raise and free use of the Lazy S cottage. Amy said, "That's nice, too—"

She seemed to be expecting him to go on, saying something else. There was only one other topic he could think of. "Amy, has Lee found a town job? He's picked up quite a bit of money—"

The girl showed a flare of angry color in her cheeks. She interrupted him, "I don't know a thing about Lee's private business! And now, Tom Barlow, I'm going to say some hard but necessary things to you—"

She drew a deep breath, her face going even darker from angry emotion whose source Tom couldn't guess. What had he done to rile her so? Then, before she could speak, there was a sudden sound of many

people running, out on the walk, an excited yell from the front of the store:

"Dad Segrist and Bus Hawthorne, up in front of the Gem—"

LEAVING AMY, Tom hit the walk at full stride, plunged into the street, and stretched his long legs.

A crowd was clotted thick in front of the Gem Saloon. Tom used elbows and shoulders ruthlessly, plowing through.

Dad Segrist was down on one knee, half dazed, white hair disordered. There was an ugly bruise on his cheek, and blood from a split lip trickled down his chin.

Nearby, Bus Hawthorne stood easily. This right bower of Sid Kellner's was a squat, barrel-shaped man, with inordinately long arms.

Hawthorne smiled thinly at Tom. "You buying in, Barlow?" he said. "Hope so—not enough gimp in that old fool to make an interesting scuffle, and he hasn't half paid for the lip he threw my way!"

"No gimp?" Segrist mumbled furiously, trying to rise. "You dog, I'll beat your head off!"

"Dad, you stay put," Tom told him gently, and went at Hawthorne.

His last fight of this kind was half a dozen years in the past. Fighting, to Tom's way of thinking, was for hot-headed fools, easily avoided if a man had any sense. This couldn't be avoided, and he went into it the way he tackled any unpleasant chore, soberly and ploddingly.

Hawthorne grinned contemptuously, feinted him wide open and sent his right fist in, straight and lightning-fast. Tom managed to twist and take it against his forehead, still its driving force slammed him against a hitchrail.

"Told Sid there was nobody to worry us among you Lazy S old women—least of all you!" Hawthorne said, and leaped at him.

Tom somehow stayed on his feet, swung at Hawthorne while off balance and managed to tag the big man, but was hit again and sent reeling away from the rail toward the walk, where he fell over a bench in front of the saloon. Hawthorne followed, leaning down to club with his fists, then following up with vicious swings of his boots.

Tom crabbed sideways, shoulders hunched to protect his head, breath gone from the brutal tattoo of blows against his ribs and back; they came too fast for him to keep count. But he grimly endured it, a little surprised at his ability to take punishment; he braced himself for leverage and came up again, close to Hawthorne, hitting the man, right fist, left fist, aiming at the chin and connecting solidly both times, putting every ounce of power he possessed into the lifting blows.

Hawthorne staggered back, arms flailing, fell off the walk and into the street. He tried to roll up to his feet, lost his balance and pitched heavily down on his face. The crowd gave way, roaring in excitement, obviously thinking Tom would follow fast and pay off the blows he had taken while down.

But Tom paused, gulping for air; he had no intention of using his boots, was quite surprised at this turn of events, hopeful Hawthorne had had enough and that this was the end of it. However, the man came erect, somewhat groggy, savagely glaring.

He lunged at the hitchrail, ripped it off its posts, and whirled on Tom Barlow, lifting the length of timber to swing it at Tom's head.

"That's enough!" Lee Chasen shouted.

CHASEN shoved through the crowd, a tough look on his handsome face, hand resting on a low-hung beltgun. The crowd noise chopped off. Tom stared at the boy unbelievingly. He had a gun himself, a short-barreled .44 in a buttoned-down jacket pocket; for Tom it was a necessary range tool. He hadn't belted on a holster in years. Neither had Lee. What was he doing with one now?

Hawthorne's barrel chest was pumping hard; a jagged cut showed on his flinty chin. The man swore furiously.

"Damn you, what's the idea of butting into my fight?"

"It's not my idea, but Sid's," Lee said. "Go cuss him, if you don't like it."

Hawthorne grunted, wiped blood from his face, and sent a final hard look at Tom. "Barlow, you got off easy this time. But I'm going to pick it up again—and soon!"

Hawthorne left, slamming people roughly out of his way. Tom saw Kellner, beyond the crowd, speak angrily to the big man, saw Kellner beckon imperatively to Lee Chasen.

Tom Barlow understood then, and the knowledge gave him a sick feeling. Lee had hired to Kellner, had lined himself deliberately with the man who meant to ruin Lazy S. Kellner had provided the money Lee had flourished.

Lee studied Tom with goading triumph.

"This makes everything even between us," Lee said. "But nobody'll step up to save your hide next time; better quit Segrist and get from under before the roof falls in! You're back at the bottom, boy, right where you started, and I'm the one in the high saddle—to stay!"

He swaggered away, also shoving people aside. Tom had a belated glimpse of Amy Allen, across the street. She frowned at him and moved off, returning to the store with even less of an opinion of him than before, in all likelihood . . . .

He sat on a bale of hay in a livery stable, his back against another bale. He was stripped to the waist. Dad Segrist was fussily tending the purple welts laid thickly on his back and sides, sponging them with liniment. Tom winced at its stinging bite.

The Lazy S punchers had come along and were standing nearby, muttering among themselves. Tom caught snatches of their talk.

"Heard that Kellner has got him two thousand head of feeders," one said. "Some fellows over on the Laramie plain owns them—needs graze bad and is willing to go halves on what they'll bring, come fall, with anybody who can provide it."

"Good way to get rich quick," another commented. "Slip some cash under the table to that string-spine agent on the reservation, move those cows onto Agency grass, then wait for them to get fat."

"Maybe moving onto Agency grass won't be so easy," the first one said.

"The town's betting Kellner won't find it much trouble," the other growled. "He's got Hawthorne, that wild kid, Chasen, two gunhands, and more on the way. Kellner himself is plenty tough. What have we got to buck such a bunch?"

They all fell silent. They were all good men, solid and dependable—but chosen for stock savvy and not for fighting. They would fight if ordered to do so, face Kellner and his bunch and do the best they could.

Their best wouldn't be nearly enough, not against practiced gunnies.

Tom studied Dad Segrist. There was a continuous quiver in the old man's hands, put there probably by reaction from what Bus Hawthorne had done to him, and shame at the little he had been able to do in return.

Figuratively Speaking—

By S. OMAR BARKER

Willowy, buxom,
Slender or fat,
A cowgal's as young
As she gets looked at!

TOM REACHED a decision. "Dad, that's enough. Give the liniment back to the hostler."

He put on shirt and jacket, and stood up. Segrist had gone to the front of the stable. Tom crooked a finger at the puncher who had started the talk about Kellner. "You know where that bunch hangs out?"

"Down at Beeson's barn and corral, the other end of town, I heard," the puncher said, and squared his shoulders. "We going to pay them a visit, Tom?"

"No," Tom Barlow said. "You and the others take Dad along to the Cheyenne House; get supper and take it easy in the bar afterwards. See he stays put, and you do the same. I'll be along after a while."

He went out the back of the stable and along the alley behind the buildings fronting on Trail Bend's main street. The sun had been down for some time now; gray twilight was fast settling on the town.

Tom stayed in the alley for four blocks, until the buildings played out; the street now became a road, winding off toward the hills. He came out on this road and paused a moment, looking toward the church where the social was being held, a little distance off to his left. Warm light bloomed there, and he heard a clatter of cheerful talk.

He would sure like to have attended that social with Amy, Tom thought, absently unbottoning his jacket pocket, taking out the .44 and checking it. He shoved the iron under his waistband and moved on along the road, pacing softly, thinking about Lee Chasen and that holstered belt-gun, wishing Lee hadn't hired to Kellner.

Beeson's barn and corral was about a hundred yards beyond the end of the street, a catch-all sort of place dealing in cut-rate feed, worn rigs, and horses of dubious worth. A fire crackled briskly out in the middle of the corral, behind the barn, and shadowy figures moved back and forth there. It was a good spot for Kellner to use while biding his time. He moved down the near side of the barn, hugging it tightly, until he came to the sagging corral fence.

Four men were grouped about the fire. Sid Kellner suddenly spoke up harshly:

"You've got grub and whisky, and you'll stay right here; I'm not going to have any more foolishness like what happened a while ago! Two days until those Laramie feeders are here and ready to move onto the Agency grass—I want all of you ready for the showdown that'll come then."

Hawthorne growled something, sullenly.

Kellner answered him, tartness in his voice: "Sure, we could have wiped out Lazy S this afternoon! We could do it right now—they're all still on hand, including Segrist's ox of a foreman you clouted around. Try that, and you know what'd happen? All the law in Wyoming would come down on us like a ton of bricks! It's going to happen on the Agency graze. That's Federal land, and I've got the Federal angle taken care of. Now, stay put until I say it's time to leave!"

Tom grunted inwardly. Ox, was he? The .44 came up and he was vastly tempted to go over the fence with it blazing. Then he sighed and lowered the gun. Slow and cautious—this was the only way he knew how to do anything. Maybe he *was* an ox, at that.

KELLNER left the fire with Hawthorne, walking toward the barn and out of sight. Tom had passed a trash pile; he turned back, groped around and found a chunk of metal, sighted at the fence, and tossed it forward. It struck a corral rail, making a small clatter.

A taut challenge came from the fire: "Who's there?"

The blaze crackled briskly. The man who had spoken came several paces toward the fence. The other one with him said, "Go and take a look. I'll have a bottle open by the time you get back."

Tom hugged the barn wall. The man came to the fence and quested along it suspiciously. Tom scratched warped wood lightly. The man grunted, looking back toward the fire. "Pour me a stiff one. Maybe only a cat here, but I'll make sure."

He ducked between the rails. Tom slid forward and hit him with the flat of the .44,

while he was still bent over, striking at the back of his neck. He caught the man so he would not make a noise falling, and eased him down. A tense moment or so passed. Then he began to drag the fallen man away from the fence, into the lee of the barn.

It was slow, nerve-wracking business, but he made it. The man stirred, with a whimper; Tom tapped him again.

And not a moment too soon. That other fellow was coming to the fence. "Murph!" he called. "Where'd you get to?"

Tom crouched low, holding his breath. A burst of mingled laughter and music came from the church social. The man in the corral paused to tilt his bottle, with a gurgling sound, then came through the fence and along the side of the barn. "Murph, better hustle back or Kellner'll skin you!"

He toed the inert body of his friend and recoiled, starting a harsh, surprised oath that was chopped short; Tom, rising beside him, swung the .44 again.

Two of Kellner's bunch were senseless—it was an improbable piece of luck he hadn't counted on, now beyond doubt played out. But he could go at Kellner now without so much opposition in the way. Only Hawthorne. That corral fire flickered brightly, with no one showing there, and Tom was glad that Lee, off at the social with Amy, wouldn't be mixed up with what must come next.

Then Amy Allen's astonished voice sounded from behind him: "Tom Barlow, what in the world are you doing?"

He jackknifed to his feet, whirling around. Moonlight was beginning to dilute the night's first deep blackness, and Tom saw her with clarity. She wore a long-skirted party dress with many flounces, and elbow-length white gloves.

Tom leaped at her, whipped an arm about the girl's waist and clamped a hand over her mouth. She promptly bit his hand and kicked his shin. He whispered, "Amy, keep your voice down! You've got to get away from here!"

She wrenched her head aside. "Darn you, let go of me! I saw you from the church, heading down the road. There's something I've got to say to you right now!"

Tom interrupted her: "You left Lee at the church?"

She answered indignantly, voice rising: "Lee's invitation wasn't the one I accepted! Can't you talk about anything but your darned raises and that shallow, worthless Lee Chasen?"

Tom's hand tightened over her mouth again, and Amy fought him again vigorously. Holding her thus was rather pleasant, even with her small fists pummeling his ribs. But he had scant time to appreciate it. A run of fast hoofbeats was sounding on the road from town. And Kellner spoke with sudden harshness in the corral:

"No sign of those two scuts! Bus, come along; you'll have a chance to use your fists after all—on them!"

THE RUNNING HORSE stopped in front of the barn, and its rider leaped down. Lee Chasen yelled, "Sid! I picked up word Tom Barlow was headed this way. I told you not to underrate him."

Tom released Amy. "Get back to the church—run!" he said.

"I will not!" she cried. "Tom Barlow, you listen to me—"

He gave the girl a hard shove that sent her spinning away from him, then went at the fence. No time now for caution or figuring even one minute ahead. No time to crawl between those rails, either. He hit them head-on; the top rail broke with a popping sound and he fell into the corral on his hands and knees.

Kellner was dead ahead, by the fire. Gunflame seemed to spout from the man's fingers, so swift was his draw. Lead seemed to fan Tom's face and tug at his clothing. He pulled trigger once himself, with no visible result. Kellner was sliding swiftly sideways toward the barn, firing as he moved.

Tom ran at the man, angling to cut him off, and found himself in a nightmarish tangle of parked rigs and piles of gear. He floundered through this, and ran into four high wheels from a freight wagon; lead

ricochoted from an iron tire, screaming past his head. A huge shadow loomed, and Hawthorne caught him from behind, whipping those long arms around him, muscles snapping cable-tight. "Sid! I got the son—"

Tom bowed his body forward in a furious burst of strength; he broke the grip and went away at a headlong stagger, his gun shaken loose and kicked aside. Kellner said from somewhere nearby, "I'm out of shells! Break him up!"

Hawthorne was coming after Tom, showing a wicked grin by moonlight, long arms spreading. Tom grabbed at one of the wheels by a spoke and jerked it toward himself, a weight that one man could never handle, ordinarily, but he balanced it and horsed it around, gave it a shove and jumped clear. Hawthorne tried to leap aside, but the toppling wheel caught him as it fell with a heavy thump; he screamed obscenely, pinned to the ground.

Tom saw the .44 and snatched it up. He heard Lee yell something anxiously, from the barn; animals were whistling in shrill fright there. A hurried snicking of metal sounded—Kellner reloading—but Tom could not spot him and started uncertainly toward the barn. Then he stopped, ice in his blood as he suddenly realized the man was behind him.

HAWTHORNE was moaning softly. "Sid, get this wheel off—"

"In a minute, Bus," Kellner said gently. And, "That's it, Barlow—stand frozen. Maybe I did down-rate you some, but I'll remedy that right now; no stupid ox like you is going to shake the Agency grass out of my fist!"

Tom Barlow fell straight forward, hitting the ground hard. A bullet ripped the air where he had been a split second ago. He whipped over on his back, tilted up the .44 at his waist, and pulled trigger. And Kellner was dead, though he stood a second or so, gun slowly sagging, before he went down on his back with a sodden crunch of finality.

Tom slowly rose, with the sober thought that maybe it was a good thing he had had no experience in this sort of business—another man would probably have turned around, and would surely have been killed.

Hawthorne was quiet, hugging the ground. Lee Chasen came from the barn, gun jerking nervously in his fist.

Tom put away his own .44 and started walking toward the boy. Lee began to back up. He bumped into the barn.

Tom reached out, jerked the gun from Lee's hand and threw it far into darkness. Lee stood pale-faced, mouth working convulsively. Tom lifted his hand to cuff the boy, hesitated, then took out his roll. "Here's twenty dollars, Lee. Get out of Trail Bend; don't ever come back!"

Lee stumbled away at a ragged pace. Amy Allen came across the corral, looking toward Kellner's still body, her face white and frightened. She said, "Tom Barlow, you scared me nearly to death and I thought maybe you had changed. But—giving good money away to Lee again!"

Tom lifted the girl off her feet. She cried out, kicking frantically. About his third kiss, she stopped that. After the sixth, Tom paused to catch his breath. "You're going to marry me and move into the cottage at Lazy S—right away!"

She said, with surprising calm, "All right. Now put me down."

"I like holding you this way. What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Just to stop being so slow and cautious. All that gabble about your raise, and not a word of what I wanted to hear! You kiss a girl at a dance and put dreams in her head; then leave her to grab at another man's invitation to the social."

He had to grin. Amy would keep a prod under his coat, all right. Whoever owned those two thousand feeders from Laramie was going to find that out; he'd take a hard bargain from Tom Barlow to graze them on the Agency land, or else.

He would likely stay slow and cautious, in some things. But he'd also be hell on wheels, if needful; this night, he had learned how. Tom kissed Amy again, greatly content, and they went together to meet the crowd coming pell-mell from town.

Eddie knew the girl resented this wild, lonely land

Old Man Odaffer's Kid

By Ben Frank

A WEEK and a day after Mark Dawson's body was found, the Slash D crew got together in the early morning spring sunshine near the front porch of the old log ranch house. There was a job to be done, and not one of them wanted to do it. Especially old man Odaffer's kid.

"Somebody has got to meet the stage." Tex Tyson, the whiskery old cook and handyman, held out his sweat-stained hat. "Fellow who draws the paper with the X on it goes."

For a moment, everyone held back. Then Johnny-Crow, the Indian cowboy, rail-thin, dark-eyed, reached into the hat and drew a slip of paper. Red Oberg, squat, heavy-shouldered, helped himself to a slip. Then it was old man Odaffer's kid's turn.

His name was Eddie, and he wasn't ex-

EDDIE LIVED so much in the awful past he couldn't see the future—until Ella pointed it out to him

actly a kid, for he'd passed his twenty-first birthday. Neither did he have that starved, kicked-around look he'd had when he'd first come to live on the Slash D. But deep down inside, he still had too much of that scared feeling that had been pounded into him for so many years. It takes a long time for a cussed, cuffed, unloved kid to learn to keep his shoulders up and his chin out. And he never quite forgets who he is. Eddie knew that from bitter experience.

Grinning faintly, the long-legged, yellow-haired cowboy hitched up his faded levis and reached into the hat.

"I'm always unlucky," he said.

Sure enough, his slip of paper had the X on it.

"Okay," he said, "I'll go meet the kids' aunt."

But he wasn't grinning now. He disliked this Aunt Ella Wright wholeheartedly, even if he didn't know much about her and had never seen her. She was coming to take away the Dawson kids, and in her telegram she'd said, "Advertise the ranch for sale." That alone was enough to turn Eddie against her.

Stepping up on the porch, he thought of Mark Dawson and felt his eyes sting. Seven years ago, when Eddie had been a no-good brat, homeless and hopeless, Mark Dawson had believed in him. He'd brought him out to the Slash D and pointed to an empty bed in the bunkhouse.

"It's yours, Eddie, as long as you want it and behave yourself."

Then this girl from the East, Martha, had come to teach the school, and Mark had married her. Martha was pretty wonderful. It didn't make any difference to her that Eddie's old man had been a bum.

First, Butch came into the world. A couple years later, Susie was born. And just like that, Eddie had four people he would have fought to the death for.

But a year ago Martha had died—a bad cold that ran into pneumonia before anyone knew what was going on. And now Mark was gone. Ella Wright, the kids' only living relative, was taking over—which meant the end of the Slash D. The end of Mark and Martha Dawson's dream that some day little Butch and Susie would own and run the old ranch. Stumbling a little blindly, Eddie went on into the log house.

RED-HEADED, like his mother had been, Butch sat on the pine floor, playing happily with some old chewed-up blocks. At five, he didn't quite understand the meaning of death.

"Is my Aunt Ella comin' today?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eddie answered.

"I don't want her to come! I won't go away with her!" He began to cry, for going away was something he did understand.

Eddie went on into the bedroom, thinking, damn Ella Wright, anyway! He stepped up to the small bed and stared down at Susie, who was three and a half and nothing more than a baby. Brown hair, brown eyes—she took after Mark, except she was as pretty as Martha had been. Her face was covered with angry red splotches. Eddie grinned faintly at Johnny Crow's Indian ma, who had come to look after the two kids.

"Measles, sure enough," he said.

The fat old woman nodded.

Eddie thought, Ella Wright won't take the kids away for a few days.

Fifteen minutes later, he was on his way to Red Dog Crossing to meet the noon stage.

The sun shone warm and bright on the new grass, even if there were some thunderclouds working up over the mountains. Eddie let the grays amble along at a pretty good gait, all the time thinking his bitter and angry thoughts. Why, he kept asking himself, did Mark have to die? He had a lot of questions running through his head, but no answers.

He came to the shallows of Bear River. While the team drank, Eddie's blue eyes stared up at the short-cut trail that ran along the face of an immense cliff overlooking the river. It was from that high trail that Mark had fallen to his death in the river below. Exactly how it had happened no one knew, for he'd been alone that Friday afternoon.

Eddie drove on across the foaming water, a cold hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. No matter who bought the Slash D, without the Dawsons it would never seem like home again.

Two hours later, he was driving along the rutted street between scattered false-fronted buildings. He found a place to tie his team in the shade and crossed over to the post office to wait for the stage.

"Saw in the Red Dog Weekly yesterday that the Slash D is for sale," Joe Fry, the postmaster said.

Eddie nodded gloomily, and Joe went back to his work inside the dingy building.

Presently, Eddie saw Quince Fasser, owner of the neighboring Triangle, ride along the street and dismount in front of the general store. Eddie stiffened slightly. He remembered Quince Fasser making fun of his old man, calling him a drunken bum to his face. Telling Eddie he was no better than his old man. Laughing when the kid cried in anger and hurt.

He thought of the trouble Mark and Quince had had over the lush grasslands along Bear River. Some said the trouble went deeper than a range dispute. It went back to Martha, who had married Mark instead of Quince.

Eddie didn't know about that. He just knew the two men had disliked each other, and that he hated Quince Fasser. Then, lifting his gaze, he saw the stage careening into the street, and suddenly the cold hollowness was again back in his stomach.

The stage rolled to a halt. There were three passengers. A man, a woman and a girl. And suddenly Eddie knew the girl was Ella Wright. She was twenty-one or -two, maybe. Slender, not very tall. He'd always thought that Martha had been pretty, but this younger sister—

EDDIE stumbled out into the street where she stood and pulled his big hat from his yellow hair. She looked at him soberly, appraisingly. She had blue eyes, wide-set; a straight nose with some freckles under a clear skin; a sweet, soft mouth. He saw her eyes widen when they dropped to the sixgun he wore about his flat waist, and he knew that guns scared her some.

"I'm Eddie Odaffer," he said, "and came to take you to the ranch."

"But—" Her voice was soft and low and maybe a little uncertain, "the children were to be brought to me here."

"Susie has the measles."

"Oh," Ella said, shoulders sagging. "We thought you'd likely want to stay at the ranch."

"Yes, I— May I wash up before we start?"

She smiled then for the first time, and Eddie caught his breath. Her smile was like sunshine breaking through rain.

He stood watching her cross to the hotel, a straight-limbed, lovely girl, very different from what he'd expected. And suddenly he began to hope. Maybe she'd understand how Mark and Martha had felt about the ranch. Maybe she'd like it here and want to stay on, making a home for the kids out here where they belonged. Maybe—

"Hello, Odaffer."

Turning, Eddie found himself face to face with Quince Fasser.

"Is that girl the Dawson kids' guardian?" Quince asked.

"Yeah," Eddie answered, his eyes moving over the big man, the heavy black beard, the hard mouth and thick shoulders. He noted the gun dangling at Quince's right hip. "Yeah, she's Ella Wright."

Fasser leaned against a porch post, a sneer on his fac said. "I want to talk to her about buying the Slash D."

"No law against it," Eddie said.

He picked up Ella's two suitcases and carried them to the buckboard. At that moment, the girl came hurrying up from the hotel, and Fasser shoved away from the porch post and sauntered to the buckboard. Eddie made the introductions and saw that Ella's first impression of the big man was favorable.

Fasser asked, "How long will you be here, Miss Wright?"

Ella looked questioningly at Eddie, and he said, "At least a week. Susie has the measles now."

"That should give you time to decide what's a fair price," Fasser said, smiling at Ella. "In the meantime, I'll go to Whippley—that's our county seat—and have my lawyer draw up a purchase contract. Then if we reach an agreement on price—and I believe we can—"

"I'm sure we can, Mr. Fasser," Ella said quickly.

Listening, Eddie felt his hopes die. This girl might be pretty and young, but she had definitely made up her mind about the Slash D. Scowling, he helped her into the buckboard and then climbed up beside her.

They drove from Red Dog Crossing in silence. At last, Eddie said, "Mark and Quince Fasser never got along. Mark wouldn't never have let Fasser get hold of the Slash D."

She gave him a long, level look. "I can make a living for myself," she said quietly. "But with two children to care for, I must get what I can out of the ranch to help pay their way."

Her eyes moved over him and then off across the rugged landscape toward the snow-capped mountains and the rising storm. A shudder ran over her.

"This country frightens me," she said. "It's so big—so empty. And I keep remembering that Martha died out here. She was quite a lot older than I, but I loved her dearly. Then she came out here to teach and married Mark Dawson. She never got to come home, even for a short visit."

"She had a couple of babies to look after," Eddie said. "She couldn't leave 'em, or take 'em along."

Ella said nothing to this, but sat looking straight ahead in a still-faced way. Eddie knew how it was. She had her mind set against the ranch, Mark Dawson and the West. She couldn't sell the ranch and be on her way home any too soon to suit her. A rumble of thunder rolled across the darkening sky, and the girl lifted her eyes fearfully.

When they came to Bear River crossing, Eddie pointed to the high cliff trail.

"Mark fell from up there someplace," he said.

She shuddered again, and he knew he'd given her one more reason to be afraid of this country.

BEFORE they reached the Slash D, it began to rain fitfully, giving the country a grim, unfriendly look. Soon they topped a rise and saw the old house and the unpainted sheds and barns, dreary and uninviting in the cold, driving rain.

The Slash D crew stood on the porch. Tex Tyson, chewing and spitting. Red Oberg, squat and ugly, two days' growth of stubble on his big chin. Johnny Crow, his coppery face a mask hiding whatever thoughts lurked in his mind. And Johnny Crow's ma, a fat, sloppy old woman who looked pretty fierce. Ella had a right to stare at them out of wide, frightened eyes, but Eddie suddenly felt angry with her.

"Maybe they don't look like much to you," he said coldly, "but they'd do anything for Butch and Susie."

He leaped to the ground, helped Ella down and walked with her onto the porch out of the rain. Her smile was forced as he made the introductions. No one said anything much, while all the time the rain rattled on the tin roof. Then Butch came out, took one look at Ella and began to yell, "I don't like you! I ain't goin' away with you!"

No one knew what to do or say. No one, except Ella herself. She reached down and put her arms around the rebellious Butch.

"I love you, Butch," she said gently.

Maybe then she looked something like the mother whom Butch remembered. Maybe it was her voice, or her smile, or the feel of her arms. Anyway, the next thing Eddie knew the kid was clinging to Ella, and she was holding him close and trying to blink back her own tears. Then, sweeping him up in her arms, she lugged him into the house.

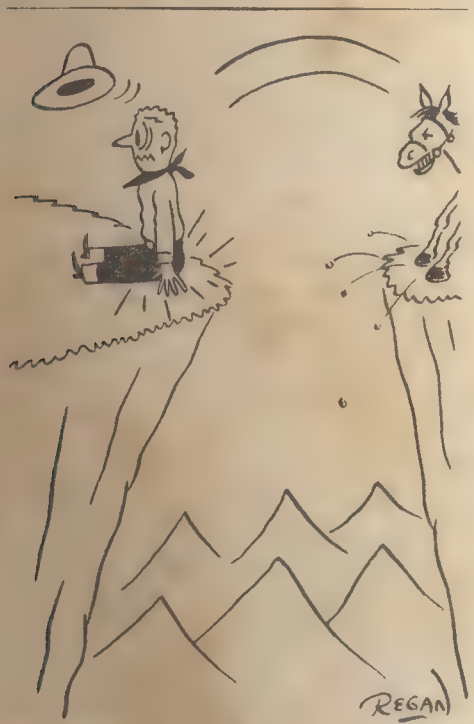
"I'll be danged!" Tex muttered. "That girl may be all right, after all!"

Later, Eddie and Johnny Crow unhooked the grays and put them in the barn.

"Maybe if you'd marry her, Eddie," Johnny said, grinning, "she'd stay on here and—"

Eddie made a pass at the Indian kid with a pitchfork handle, and Johnny ran out into the rain, laughing. But old man Odaffer's kid wasn't laughing. He was remembering who he was.

Being the son of the town drunk hadn't been a picnic. Dragging his old man home to that shack behind the saloon and putting him to bed. Being laughed at by the other kids, stealing or begging something to eat, going to school only because the schoolhouse was warmer in winter than the shack. Eddie wondered what this city girl, Ella, would think if she knew the truth about him. Well, he had a pretty good idea what she'd think. She'd think the less she had to do with him, the better. For a long time Eddie stood listening to the rain and remembering.



IN THE MORNING, the storm had passed and the sun came up into a clear blue sky. Eddie stepped from the bunkhouse and stared across the rolling green range to the distant gleaming mountains. On a morning like this it was hard to realize that everything wasn't right with the world.

Ella came out of the log house and said, "Good morning, Eddie." She was dressed in a split riding skirt and an old sweater. "I found these clothes in a dresser in my room. Also, a picture of Martha and Mark. Somehow I always thought of him as an old man. But he wasn't so old, after all, was he?"

"Thirty-eight last November," Eddie said.

"The way he's kept Martha's things—he must have loved her very much." The girl's eyes swept about and came to rest on Eddie's brown face. "I can ride a horse," she said. "I want to look around—see what I have to sell. And I want to see where Martha and Mark are buried."

He led the way to a grassy slope back of the house. There they'd made a border of white stones around the two graves. A tall pine shaded the place.

The girl stood with her back to the pine for quite a while not looking at Eddie, not looking at the graves after the first swift glance. She was staring at the mountains, and Eddie guessed that in her heart there was a great anger at this wild, lonely country that had claimed her sister's life.

Later, he saddled a horse for her and one for himself, and they rode off to the north and up to the top of a high ridge. From here they could see for miles. He pointed out Slash D cattle grazing in the meadows. He showed her a distant break in the mountains that was called Settler's Pass.

"Used to be some talk of a railroad being built through that pass," he said.

But Ella seemed to have a one-track mind this morning. "How much should I get for all this?" she asked.

"Mark said it was worth about ten thousand above all his debts," Eddie answered. "You'd have to check at the bank to find out how much he owed. But if they built the railroad, the ranch would be worth three times that, I reckon."

"I'm afraid I can't wait for a railroad that's nothing but talk," Ella said in that

quiet way that told him she had her mind made up and didn't intend to change it. . . .

The next day, he hooked the grays to the buckboard and took Ella to Red Dog Crossing. What she learned at the bank she never told him. But he knew she had figured out her asking price for the Slash D.

All the way home, he tried to think of some way to make her understand what the ranch had meant to Mark and Martha. He wanted her to know how they had hoped to pass it on to their kids. He wanted her to realize how hard both Mark and Martha had worked to build up something worth passing on. But old man Odaffer's kid couldn't seem to find the right words.

That evening, when the Slash D crew had gathered around the potbellied stove in the bunkhouse, old Tex said, "That girl's all right. It's just that bein' city-growed, she don't see things like we do. Maybe if she had a chance to get used to ranch life, or if she understood that them two kids belong here—" He let it go at that and stared hard at Eddie. "You're the one to tell her," he added. "She likes you."

Eddie shook his head. He wanted to run and hide someplace, but there wasn't anyplace to go.

"Johnny's ma has gone back to her own family tonight," Tex went on relentlessly. "So I figure this is a good time for you to turn the cards face up in front of this girl."

Eddie went outside and stood looking up at the stars as if they might give him the courage to speak up to this girl from the East. Heart pounding a little crazily, he at last stepped to the door of the log house and knocked.

"Come in," Ella called.

SHE HAD a fire going in the old stone fireplace, against the night's chill. She had Susie cradled in her arms, and Butch sat at her feet. Eddie had butted in right in the middle of a bedtime story.

"Sit down, Eddie," Ella said, smiling, giving him a sly wink. "I can't leave the fairy prince stranded in the middle of nowhere, you know.

She went on with the story, her voice low and gentle, the flames from the fire throwing dancing patterns against her bright hair. Listening, watching, Eddie felt a lump squeeze up into his throat. He knew he'd never forget Ella and this moment.

Presently she put the kids to bed and then came back into the front room.

"Susie's face is about cleared up," she said. "I think we'll be able to leave Monday."

Then she spoke of her plans for the future. She'd go back to her job in the city, and hire a woman to look after Butch and Susie during the daytime. She was hoping the money from the sale of the ranch could be stretched over the years of their childhood, but a little afraid of the responsibility and burden of these two little ones. But she was determined to do her best for them.

"And in the city," she finished, "they'll have so many advantages. Good schools—"

"There's a right good school in Red Dog Crossing," Eddie said stubbornly.

But Ella went right on talking of her plans as if she hadn't heard him. Pretty soon he said good night and went back to the bunkhouse.

"It's no use," he told the crew. "She's got her plans all made."

A heavy silence settled over the room. . . .

Thursday morning, Eddie and the girl again rode out on the range. She asked him a thousand questions, but never told him what she was thinking. Coming around a granite ridge, she halted suddenly and asked, "Who are those men down there? Do they have any right to be on Slash D land?"

Riding up beside her, Eddie looked off across the valley and saw three riders trailing a loaded packhorse. They were apparently headed toward Settler's Pass.

He told her they might be some hunters or trappers. But he knew the time of year was wrong for that, and a feeling of uneasiness fiddled through him.

In the afternoon, he saddled a fresh horse and rode alone through the foothills and up toward Settler's Pass. Three hours later, he discovered a camp in a clump of

pines. Going along on foot, he circled the camp and climbed up where he could overlook the pass.

Three strangers were working with surveying instruments. Watching them, Eddie's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. A survey could mean but one thing. The railroad company was again considering the possibility of building a road through the pass. And suddenly he wondered if this was why Quince Fasser was so eager to buy the Slash D. Maybe, he thought, Quince had learned of the railroad's plans. And because old man Odaffer's kid hated Quince Fasser, he began to wonder if Mark Dawson's death had been murder instead of an accident.

BACK AT THE RANCH he didn't say anything about what he'd discovered or suspected. For all he knew, he could be wrong. Quince might have an iron-clad alibi for the afternoon when Mark had died.

After supper, he saw Ella walking with little Butch along the slope to the two graves. He waited until they turned back, then stepped across the big yard to meet them.

"What a glorious sunset!" Ella said.

Eddie felt a sudden worry about her and the two kids. Suppose Quince had crowded Mark over the cliff; would this girl and the kids be safe if they should stay on at the Slash D? If Quince killed once, wouldn't he kill again?

Eddie walked back to the house with them. Then Butch ran on inside, leaving Eddie alone with the girl in the deepening shadows. She smiled up at him and put a hand on his arm. Eddie stood very still, hoping she couldn't hear the banging of his heart against his ribs.

"I think I'm beginning to understand why Martha learned to love it here," she said slowly. "It's so clean and peaceful. No smoke and grime, or—"

Then Eddie told her about Mark and Martha Dawson's hopes and plans for Butch and Susie. Watching her face, he saw her expression grow still and guarded. Then for some reason, he remembered he was nobody but old man Odaffer's kid, and his voice sort of fell apart.

"Good night, Eddie," she said, and went on into the house.

He returned to the bunkhouse, knowing he'd somehow muffed his one good chance to make the girl understand. Old Tex and Red Oberg were playing checkers. Young Johnny Crow sat crosslegged on his bunk, whittling out a toy gun for Butch. Shoulders slumped, Eddie sat down and cupped his chin in his hands.

No one asked any questions, for the answers were written in the unhappy expression on Eddie's face. No one tried to cheer him up, for each knew how much Mark Dawson had meant to Eddie. Tex and Red began a new checker game. Johnny stared down at the wooden gun in his brown hands, likely the last thing he'd ever make for little Butch.

Suddenly Eddie lifted his head and said, "Tomorrow I'm going to try to find out where Quince Fasser was the day Mark fell from the trail!"

That jerked everyone to his feet.

"What's got into you, boy?" Tex growled.

"Just a fool notion, maybe," was the only answer Eddie had at the moment.

EDDIE ODAFFER arrived in Red Dog Crossing along toward noon that Friday. It was the day the weekly newspaper came out, and he stood in the shade of a lone tree, watching the people go and come from the post office. When the crowd thinned out, he wandered over to the false-fronted, unpainted building and went in.

"Hello, Eddie," Joe Fry said. "Nothin' for you but the *Red Dog Weekly*."

Without glancing at the paper, Eddie shoved it into a pocket.

"About everybody takes this paper, I reckon," he said.

Fry nodded and mopped his bald head.

"Quince Fasser?"

"Sure. Picked his mail up about an hour ago."

"Get it last Friday?"

"Quince or one of his men did. Why do you ask?"

"How about the week before that?"

Fry's eyes narrowed. "What're you gettin' at Eddie?"

"I guess you wouldn't remember that far back."

"It happens I do," Fry said. "That was the day Quince got a letter from Chicago. I remember because the postmark was blurred, and I had a heck of a time, makin' it out. But it was Chicago, all right, and Quince stood right over there by the window, readin' it. Ain't every day we get mail from Chicago."

"Morning or afternoon?"

Fry mopped his head again. "Noon. I was eatin' a sandwich and—what're you drivin' at, Eddie?"

"Just checking to make sure Quince was in town the day Mark fell from the cliff trail."

"Sure, he was in town. Now, look, Eddie, don't you go gettin' any funny ideas. Quince would raise hell with anybody who—"

The man's voice choked off.

Eddie glanced at him curiously. "Now what?"

"Just remembered—I finished that sandwich and went out to the well for a drink. Saw Quince ridin' out of town on that big roan."

"You mean he left town at noon?"

"Yeah." Fry glanced about uneasily. "I don't want to be mixed up in no trouble, Eddie." Again the man glanced around. "But Mark was a damn good friend of mine. If somebody killed him—"

"That's the way I feel about it," Eddie said bleakly.

"Funny thing. Quince got another letter from Chicago today. Postmark wasn't blurred on this one."

Eddie went out into the sunshine and walked unhurriedly to his horse. He didn't have any proof that Fasser had met Mark on the trail, but now he knew that such a meeting had been possible. His next move, he wasn't sure of.

HE RODE to Bear River crossing and sat staring at the short-cut trail that edged along the face of the cliff, trying to figure what might have happened up there two weeks ago. Finally he rode into the trail and followed it, seeing it now not as a place where an accident had happened, but as a place where a murder might have been committed. There were no turns in the trail. A man could not meet or catch up with another one unexpectedly. Seeing Fasser approach, Mark would have been on his guard.

But, Eddie suddenly thought, maybe for some reason Mark hadn't seen Fasser. Then he came to a tree- and brush-choked break in the cliff and knew that here might be the answer. A man might hide his horse among the scrub pines at the top of the cliff, climb down through the break to the trail and thus take another by surprise.

Following the short cut on to the south, he came out on the rolling grasslands and rode on to the Slash D. He tried to think of a way to discover for sure why and how Mark had fallen to his death. There just didn't seem to be any way to discover the truth. Then when he came in sight of the log house, he saw Quince Fasser's roan tied to the rail.

Of course it wasn't any of Eddie's business, but he wanted to know what was going on inside the house. He left his horse at the corral gate and eased up to the porch, intending to walk in without knocking. But just outside the open door, he was stopped by Quince's smooth, pleasant voice.

"You mustn't pay too much attention to what Eddie Odaffer tells you," the man was saying. "I'm afraid he takes after his father—especially when it comes to stretching the truth for his own benefit. Hasn't anyone ever told you about old man Odaffer, Miss Wright?"

"No," Ella answered in a small voice.

"Then it's time someone did," Fasser said in a fatherly tone. "Lou Odaffer worked for me off and on until he got to drinking so much I couldn't depend on him. Eddie was just a kid then, but—"

Old man Odaffer's kid didn't wait to hear

any more. Turning, he stumbled back to the corral. Inside, he felt a little sick, knowing the things the man would tell the girl. Things that Eddie couldn't deny, because they were true. But suddenly, anger and suspicion came to his rescue. Face pale and grim, he swung into the saddle.

He didn't ride to the trail that led along the cliff. Instead, he kept to the high ridges west of the river. At last he came to the crumbling edge of the cliff, and pulling his blowing horse to a halt, stared off to the east across the ribbon of Bear River and the miles of flat land, some of it broken to the plow. But he didn't stop there very long. He had to find that break in the cliff from the top side, and make sure a man could climb down to the trail.

He rode on northward, circling jagged outcroppings of rocks and deep gullies. It was slow and dangerous going. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But he found what he was searching for, and left his horse tied in a clump of scrub pines.

THERE wasn't any path down through the tangle of brush and trees. He didn't find any evidence that someone else had been down this way, but he hadn't expected to. Finally he broke through a barrier of brush and trees and found himself at the edge of the short-cut trail, and knew now that a man could sneak down here and take another by surprise. Scowling, Eddie squatted behind a crumbling boulder.

He wasn't sure what might happen. For all he knew, he might have made a wrong guess about Fasser. And although this trail along the face of the cliff was the shortest route between the Slash D and the Triangle, Fasser might decide to go the long way around. But hiding and waiting were the only things he could think of to do. . . .

Quince Fasser came along the trail from the south sooner than Eddie had expected him. A big, easy-riding man, dressed up some for his business call, he carried his black store coat draped over his left arm, for the day had turned hot.

Eddie waited until the man was even with the boulder; then stepped from his hiding place and leveled his gun.

"Lift your hands, Quince!" he ordered.

Startled, the big man lifted his hands, and his coat slid from his arm and settled down among the rocks on the trail. Recognizing Eddie, his face turned an angry red.

"What the hell you think you're doing, Odaffer?" he rasped.

"Trying a little experiment," Eddie said. "Climb down off that horse, Quince. Watch your hands!"

The man obeyed, and the roan moved on along the narrow trail.

"If this is a stickup," Fasser said, "you'll—"

"I told you it's an experiment," Eddie cut in. Turn around."

Fasser turned, and Eddie stepped up behind him and shoved the gunbarrel against the man's back.

"It's a long way down there to the river," Eddie said. He reached out with his free hand and lifted Quince's gun from the holster. "Is this the way you did it, Quince? Climbed down through that break in the cliff? Got the drop on Mark? Pulled his gun and knocked him out? Then heaved him and the gun over into the river?"

Fasser's breath was coming and going hard and fast.

"You crazy, no-good kid!" he panted. "You can't prove a thing! If you think you can scare me into saying I—"

"It's so easy to do, I'm tempted," Eddie broke in softly. "Another accident, folks'd say. Sure banged his head—"

Eddie lifted Fasser's gun, and the man caught a glimpse of the moving shadow. That did it. With a hoarse cry, he ducked and ran along the trail toward the roan.

Eddie let him go, knowing he hadn't proved a thing, except that Fasser could be scared. Shoulders slumped, he watched the man lunge for the saddle. But suddenly, Fasser had a spare gun that he'd snaked from a saddlebag.

HIS GUN came up and blasted, the bullet screaming past Eddie's startled face. He lifted his own gun, but the frightened horse had swung between him

and the man. He heard Fasser yell at the horse. He saw the man fall and roll and clutch frantically at the loose rocks of the trail. Then, with a hoarse scream, Quince Fasser disappeared from Eddie's horrified gaze.

Whatever sounds he made after that were drowned by the roar of the river.

Eddie looked over the edge of the trail. There was nothing to see but the rushing water. Still half-stunned by what had happened, he stumbled toward the tree-choked break.

Then he saw Fasser's coat, where it had fallen on the trail. He reached down to pick it up and discovered he still held the man's gun in his left hand. Shoving the gun under his belt, he picked up the coat and found the papers in an inside pocket. A contract for the purchase of the Slash D —and a letter postmarked Chicago.

He looked at the contract first and saw that Ella hadn't signed it. Next, he read the letter.

> "RR going through pass for sure. Better finish up that business you started a couple weeks ago before it gets nosed around about the survey."

No name, no signature—but the note told Eddie what he'd guessed. Quince Fasser had had advance information about the railroad's plans, and knowing that Mark Dawson would never sell the Slash D, Fasser had decided to settle an old score and perhaps make it possible to buy the ranch as well.

Hands still a little unsteady, Eddie stuffed the papers back into the man's coat pocket, then dropped the coat and Fasser's gun into the foaming water below. After that, he climbed to where he'd left his horse, and headed back home. . . .

It was close to sundown when he rode into the wide yard. He didn't expect Ella to see him, but she did and came hurrying out to meet him.

Seeing her, old man Odaffer's kid wanted to hang his head in shame, run and hide someplace. But her smile somehow made him lift his shoulders and face her.

"Eddie," she said, "Quince Fasser was here this afternoon to close the deal for the ranch. But I refused to sign the contract until I talked with you again."

"With me?" Eddie said wonderingly. "Why me?"

"I've been thinking over the things you told me. How Mark and Martha worked to build up this place for Butch and Susie. Perhaps they would be happier here. Perhaps I could take care of them better here than in the city. Honestly, Eddie—" she was a little breathless now—"I haven't a thing to go back East for, except a job I don't much like. So if you'd promise to stay on and help run the ranch—"

Eddie Odaffer couldn't quite believe his ears—this girl wanting him to help her after all the things Quince Fasser must have told her. Maybe she hadn't believed Quince. In that case, she had to be told again.

"What do you say, Eddie?"

She would be safe here, he knew. And Mark and Martha's kids would be safe and happy. No one need ever know that Mark had been murdered—better if the kids always thought their dad had an accident. And as for Quince Fasser's death—here was another secret that Eddie knew he'd keep locked inside him. But this girl had to know the truth about himself.

"Listen, Ella," he began, "I'm just old man Odaffer's kid. I—"

"I'm asking Eddie Odaffer to help me, not old man Odaffer's kid!"

Maybe it wasn't so much what she said as the way she said it, with her belief in him shining in her eyes, that put an end to old man Odaffer's kid. Anyway, Eddie said, "I'll stay as long as you want me."

"That may be for a long, long time," she said.

"Forever wouldn't be too long to suit me," he said.

It was too soon for them to talk about what had happened to both of them. So they walked around the house and up past the two white-bordered graves to the top of the slope, where they could watch the flaming sunset turn to gold.

The Too-Little Shepherd

By James Clyde Harper

THE EXPRESSMAN arrived while The Man was preparing to graze the new flock of white poults. By the time he came in from the turkey pens, The Lady had the shipping crate opened and Casey was capturing her heart. A wiggly bundle of ecstasy from shiny black nose to stubby tail, he clumsily tried to be all over her at once, pinkish tongue loving everything it could touch.

"Isn't he cute!" The Lady exclaimed. "Aunt Sudie sent him."

"*That*, for a turkey shepherd? A black

CASEY HAD TO PROVE himself. That meant rushing in where even Old Herk feared to tread

cocker puppy?" The Man frowned and shook his head. "He'll never make one. Be more worry than help. We'll have to send him back."

"We won't!" Drippy tongue and roguish eyes had performed their magic. But The Lady was always a softie. She sniffled for days when it came time to market the birds. And she acted as if Old Herk's recurrent rheumatism was practically a major calamity. The Man thought Old Herk took unfair advantage sometimes, particularly during winter's coldest nights when he wanted to sleep in by the open hearth fire.

"We can't send him back," said The

Casey tore away, following The Man

Lady. "Aunt Sudie would never forgive us."

"So this is the kind of sheep dogs she has?"

"No—" The Lady had a guilty look. She'd been holding out on the mail. "Aunt Sudie thought a sheep dog too big for turkeys, so decided to send us a cocker."

The Man gave a derisive snort. Playing shepherd to two thousand growing poults would tax the ingenuity of the best sheep dog. Ten years of it had worn out Old Herk, causing the need for a new dog so Old Herk could break in a younger replacement.

"I still say we'll have to get a bigger dog," said The Man and went back to the pens.

Old Herk lolled outside the runaround gate, ready to begin his part of the day's work.

"All right, old boy. Here they come." The Man opened the gate, and shooed out the thousand white poults.

Old Herk trotted on ahead, for all the world like a shepherd leading his flock. He sniffed the warm spring air, scampered about the terrain in search of an enemy. The Man, with his shotgun, strolled behind the flock.

The thousand young poults had arrived a few days ago. This was their first day to graze. A thousand more would arrive in a month. The first batch would be ready for Thanksgiving market, the second group for Christmas dinners.

There was disease to guard against, sudden cold snaps, and dogs sometimes from down in the valley. Then there were skunks and hawks all the time, and during the spring, snakes from the hills: bullsnakes and blacksnakes and dangerous rattlers, all hibernation-starved for a juicy young poult.

There was no danger at night, for roosting sheds were concrete and metal. Nothing could get in once the doors were closed, not even the sudden cold snaps, for the sheds were thermostatically heated.

Danger was during the day when the poults were out to graze. The four grazing areas, seeded each winter, were enclosed with strong wire fences. But animals could burrow beneath and snakes crawl through the wire. They'd usually lay low until the flock grazed near, then dart in and seize a victim. Sometimes it happened so fast the poult never let out a squawk.

But Old Herk prevented much damage, by circling and searching ahead of the flock. When he spotted an enemy, he'd quickly drive the birds from danger, and hold the enemy at bay for The Man and his double-barreled shotgun.

They'd worked well together for years, ordinarily getting the enemy before it struck. But two years ago losses had increased. Last year the losses had trebled. Old Herk didn't see as well as he once had, and he couldn't get to danger points as fast. The past season a dozen young poults had vanished in broad daylight. It hadn't been hawks. The Man would have seen them coming, or at least when they made their strike. It had been skunks or snakes, unobserved by The Man, overlooked by Old Herk, dragging their victims down into the young spring grass to devour when the flock passed on.

So The Man had decided to bring in a new dog, break it in with Old Herk this year.

The Lady wrote to her Aunt Sudie, who ran sheep on her ranch in Texas. Aunt Sudie raised her own dogs, too. The Man wanted to buy a young pup. Aunt Sudie wrote it would be a gift, that she'd ship it right away—then some more in the letter that The Lady didn't read aloud. Aunt Sudie had decided a sheep dog was too big for young turkey poults, and sent a cocker pup instead.

"He won't be worth a darn," grumbled The Man, watching Old Herk for sign of an encountered enemy. "He'd always want to play with things. I'd hate to see what would happen if he tried that with a hungry mama skunk, or a big rattler just down from the hills. My gosh, he wouldn't last a minute."

His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion at the house. A door slammed, and The Lady yelled. But the bundle of black escaped her grasp and Casey romped out to investigate the feathery scents.

HE BOUNCED into the grazing area, ears perked, eyes bright with joyful expectancy. From black button nose to stubby tail, he was a wriggly bundle of joy at sight of such a vast array of playmates. He was vaguely aware of The Man and Old Herk, far around the sea of white blobs. These gave off the feathery scents, just dared Casey to a game of chase and nip, like the little brothers and sisters he remembered.

So Casey bore down on the flock, yipping greetings in his best puppy manner; but the poults were frightened and tried to escape the noisy attacker. This added spice to the game, and spurred Casey on with joyful abandon. Engrossed with giddy pursuit, he was unaware of pursuit to himself. Old Herk sped around the flock, determined to stop this yipping interloper. The Man came straight through, just as determined to oust the puppy before he did damage to any of the poults.

Not quite as awkward as the clumsy puppy, the poults evaded initial charges until they began to bunch. Then Casey pounced on the nearest, brought it down with delighted yelps. Puppy teeth sank into flesh, the second phase of the chase and nip game. But instead of coarse hair or rubbery skin as from a brother or sister, Casey's mouth held the taste of warm blood.

He lifted his head in surprise, sampled the taste again with his tongue. Casey's brain went dizzy with discovery, and a thousand years of domestication vanished. He was suddenly a beast of some nameless age, slaking thirst with the warm blood of his kill, about to devour his victim.

A growl welled deep within Casey and immature hackles tried to stand on his back. Tiny teeth bared, Casey again bit the warm flesh, for destruction now, not play. In a few moments all struggle ceased, and Casey gloated over his kill.

Then the world about Casey exploded.

Old Herk struck in full stride, worn fangs clamping Casey's neck. Casey suddenly was badly scared, and yelped wildly for anyone's help. Then he felt The Man's hand on his scruff, and Old Herk relinquished his grip.

"Back, Herk. I'll take care of this."

Casey was grateful that The Man had rushed up and saved him, and tried to twist and implant thanks on The Man's hand with his wet tongue. But The Man pressed him firmly against the ground and picked up the dead poult with his other hand.

The Lady rushed up, pleading: "No, Bill, please not that."

"You'd better go back to the house. Now's the time to teach him his lesson."

The Man struck the first blow with the poult and Casey let out a yelp of surprise. The Lady turned and fled.

Casey was scared from the very first blow. This was more grim than chastisements with a folded newspaper during housebreaking. The blows were not vicious or bruising. But each carried a jolting impact and implanted an impression on Casey's young brain. If he hurt the feathery things, then they would be used to hurt him.

Eight blows, ten, a dozen. The Man thrust the battered poult beneath Casey's wet nose. The puppy jerked away as if it were a lump of fire. The Man released his hold on Casey, and the puppy scampered for the house. The Man followed and tied the poult low on the fence near the gate where Casey would see and remember.

The Lady gathered Casey in her arms and started into the house. But The Man shook his head.

"No sympathy, Lucy."

"But he's so little . . ."

"No younger than Old Herk when he had to have his lesson. And Old Herk's turned out all right. Here, give Casey to me."

Casey didn't want to go to The Man, but there was nothing else he could do. The Man squatted on the edge of the porch, told The Lady to bring a wet cloth, and the brush and comb they used on Old Herk. Suddenly Casey wasn't scared any more. The Man's hands had a different touch, his voice a gentle tone. Casey snuggled down close while The Man scrubbed away the muss and scents of the lesson, and combed and brushed his hair. Casey wiggled his stubby tail and stretched in lazy content-

ment, especially when The Man brushed floppy ears and the itchy spot beneath Casey's chin.

The Man set him on the ground and tolled him toward the gate. Casey caught a whiff of the hanging poult, and scurried back as if from a mortal enemy. He propped on his haunches against the bottom porch step, and regarded the poult with unwinking stare, not unlike a wrinkled old man in sober contemplation. At last he dropped to his fat little tummy and began gnawing at the wooden step.

The Lady laughed and clapped her hands, and The Man grinned and nodded. "Don't think he'll ever need another lesson. Just as Old Herk never did . . ."

"Bill, look!" The Lady gasped and pointed out beyond the flock. "Old Herk's got something spotted."

THE MAN leaped upon the porch for a quick look. "Must be a snake. We could see a skunk's back from here."

Then he was sprinting through the gate, grabbing up the shotgun as he went. The Lady kept staring at Old Herk, and The Man was running to help. So neither saw Casey scramble away from the step and race after The Man. He had decided he could not play games with the white feathery things, but maybe he could with The Man. Perhaps this was their first game of chase.

So Casey tore madly along, unwilling to let The Man get away. Head lowered, short legs churning for all he was worth, Casey didn't see the man suddenly stop and aim the shotgun a few feet ahead.

Casey didn't know he had passed The Man until Death reared up before him. The rattler faced Old Herk, on the opposite side, a dead poult in the folds of its coils. With poised head and buzzing tail, it dared Old Herk to come a step nearer. But wise Old Herk held back, waiting for the shotgun blast.

Not so with charging Casey. Instinctively he knew it was an enemy that faced Old Herk. Not only to dog and man, but also to the feathery white things. These weren't to be killed, Casey reasoned, not by him nor Old Herk, nor this coiled Death.

So Casey never slackened his pace, but charged with vigorous fury. Old Herk observed him, startled, and The Man said an urgent prayer. From behind, Casey heard a blast, and heat flicked across his button nose. Almost within his reach, the ugly head dissolved into nothing, and the body writhed in the throes of death. Savagely Casey pounced, growling and biting and tugging. Old Herk stood back and stared, and The Man didn't do any better.

Even in death the snake was almost as strong as the puppy, but its strength was rapidly ebbing. Soon Casey had triumphed enough to drag the body away. Then, panting with fatigue, he flopped down beside the limp poult and looked up proudly at The Man.

Old Herk stalked over, to sniff from stern to stem, and accept the newcomer with wagging tail. Then Old Herk returned to his job of guarding the grazing flock. The Man shook the sting from his eyes and picked up the exhausted puppy.

Twice within an hour there was sponging and combing and brushing. Only this time Casey was stretched out, grateful for the gentle ministrations to his fatigued little body.

The Man grinned at The Lady, who sat on the other side.

"Blamed if I don't believe he thought he rescued the poult for me. He's sure got nerve, all right, just like Old Herk . . ." The Man's voice trailed off, and he suddenly arose.

"Guess I'd better put that crate in the shed. It'll make pretty good kindling next fall."

Scratching the itchy spot beneath Casey's chin, The Lady didn't look up. "I've already moved it."

After a moment's stillness, The Man leaned over and gently kissed her on the mouth.

Casey expelled a drowsy sigh and wagged his stubby tail. Then he stretched out in the warm spring sun and contentedly went to sleep.

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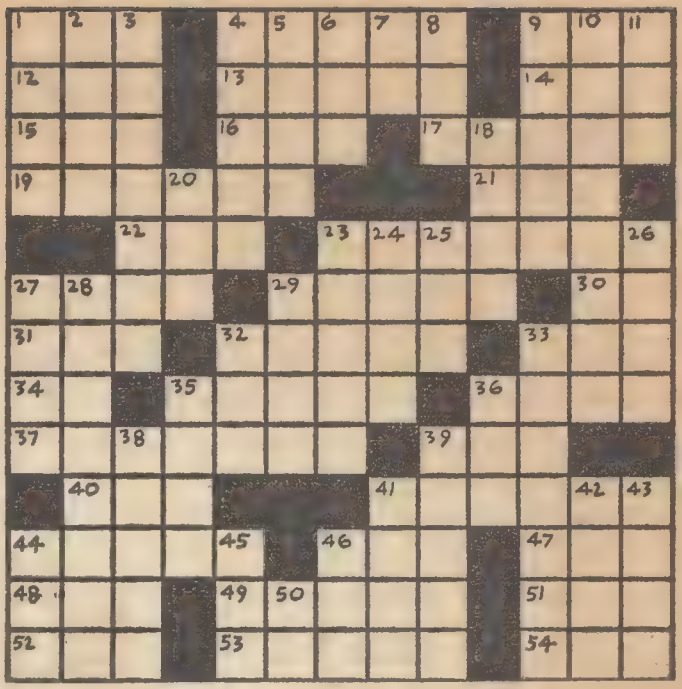


The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Normal value
4 Cowboy show
9 The lady
12 Falsehood
13 City in Nebraska
14 Thick black liquid
15 To sum up
16 Cushion
17 To track down
19 Western squatter
21 Mr. Baba
22 Young goat
23 Horse wrangler
27 Ocean vessel
29 Gallops easily
30 Negative
31 Chicken
32 Rescued
33 Girl's name
34 Either
35 Pigpens
36 Stock feed
37 Cowboy story
39 Feminine pronoun
40 Enemy
41 Engines
44 Liquid foods
46 2000 pounds
47 Not I
48 To be mistaken
49 In advance
51 Lyric poem
52 Advertisements
53 Calico horse
54 Collection

DOWN

1 Scheme
2 Military assistant
3 American Indian
4 Lassoed
5 Gen. Bradley
6 Papa
7 Exclamation of inquiry
8 Cereal grain
9 Horse's home
10 Sp.-American estate
11 Before
18 Tatters
20 Waiter's expectation
23 Interlaced
24 Monkeys
25 Man's nickname
26 Parti-colored horse
27 To display
28 White-faced steer
29 Den
32 Female saint (abbr.)
33 Western gullies
35 Pace
36 Wager
38 Becomes acid
39 Broad arroyo
41 Ditch
42 Went on horseback
43 Hard fat
44 Ocean
45 Plant juice
46 Twice five
50 Hello!

C	O	L	O	R	A	D	O	■	R	O	P	E
O	P	E	R	A	T	O	R	■	E	V	E	R
W	E	D	■	C	O	N	E	■	M	E	S	A
■	■	■	P	E	P	■	■	H	U	N	T	S
C	L	E	A	R	■	P	A	I	D	■	■	■
R	O	A	N	■	B	U	C	K	A	R	O	O
A	P	T	■	B	A	T	H	E	■	O	I	L
M	E	S	Q	U	I	T	E	■	C	A	S	E
■	■	■	U	G	L	Y	■	R	O	D	E	O
L	E	V	I	S	■	■	■	C	U	T	■	■
O	V	A	L	■	A	T	O	M	■	P	I	T
C	E	N	T	■	P	A	L	O	M	I	N	O
O	N	E	S	■	E	N	T	R	A	N	C	E

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

OUT OF THE CHUTES

HORSE HEAVEN, where herds of wild horses roamed the grasslands of the Northwest, is long gone, but there are some horses who don't believe it.

About 125 miles northwest of Miles City, Mont., there are 1200 horses who probably are under the impression that they're free as birds. They roam an area of 400 square miles, of which only the perimeter is fenced.

They are all unbroken. Stallions jealously guard their own mares, as all wild horses do, and the herds forage for their own food except in the most severe months of winter. The ranch is the closest thing to horse heaven there is today (and it must indeed seem like heaven to the horses when that hay arrives in the wintertime).

The ranch is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Bud Kramer, both ex-rodeo hands, and for them it is the fulfillment of their dreams. But the Kramers aren't running their horse heaven out of pure charity—it's a profitable business too.

Several times a year they round up the colts. With only two ranch hands to help, they bring in about 400 colts at a time. All the colts are branded, and then a few of the most likely ones are kept to be sold and the rest are free again to roam.

When they bring in a bunch of colts they never know what they'll find. Breeding, of course, is left to chance. It's a far cry from the careful, scientific mating that's done on the modern ranches of today.

But to the Kramers it's more exciting when it's left to nature. The thrill of discovering a beautiful little foal is all the more exciting because it wasn't planned. But of course the main reason why the breeding is left to chance is because the Kramers deal with such huge numbers of horses that it would be impossible to supervise their breeding.

They sell their horses to all comers. Rodeo is a big customer, the government is another, and they have many private buyers who need horses for ranch work or for riding in rough terrain.

Bud Kramer is a big man, six feet four, and all of him is muscle and bone. He's one of the strongest men in Montana and maybe in the whole West. He can actually lift a bronc—even a wild one—right off its feet. Bud is an expert at breaking horses, and often succeeds in taming an "unbreakable" one.

Whenever he hears of a vicious animal he's likely to buy it. Such broncs often come cheap, and if (which seldom happens) Kramer actually can't break it, he can always sell it to a rodeo producer.

Kramer, in fact, is almost as pleased to find a really intractable colt in his corral as a gentle one. He enjoys the battle of breaking the critter, and maybe he nourishes the hope that some day he'll turn up another Midnight or Hell's Angels or Badger Mountain.

For bucking horses *do* just turn up. They are found, not made. Not one has ever been bred. Plenty of producers have tried, though. One man mated his fiercest stallion to his most unruly mare, and the result of this union was the gentlest of saddle horses.

OCCASIONALLY an animal which has always been docile enough for the Ladies' Riding Academy will suddenly take a notion to be mean, and nothing can change its mind. One rodeo producer told us he had a colt which was the pet of the family; his children had bottle-fed it when its mother died. But one day it tried a few experimental kicks, in the direction of humans, and enjoyed this activity so much it never quit trying to kick humans.

Buckers often come from the accidental mating of blue-bloods and commoners. Apparently the thoroughbred stock transmits the temperament, and the work stock the stamina and strength.

Another thing that rodeo broncs often have in common is that they come from high country or cold country. A bucker turns up in Texas far less often than in Washington or Montana.

So Bud Kramer figures his conditions are just about ideal for discovering a great bronc. None of his horses roaming around that huge ranch are thoroughbreds, but plenty of them have aristocratic blood in them, which might just mix in an explo-

sive way with a common strain. And it's cold in Montana, and plenty hilly. So Bud is keeping his eyes open. Any day now he may discover some four-legged dynamite that will tear up arenas and toss cowboys into the next county.

Maybe if he's lucky, Bud will introduce a great star like the three we mentioned earlier, Midnight, Hell's Angels and Badger Mountain. Those were the greatest of all time, according to a poll taken recently among the top-hands.

When the poll was taken, only Badger Mountain was alive, which shows how much the cowboys respected him, because a bucker's prowess like anybody's, is much more likely to be acknowledged after he's dead.

BADGER MOUNTAIN went to the celestial horse heaven only a couple of months ago. He was 29 and had been retired for three years, but he really died, as he'd lived, in rodeo. He was actually in a chute, for the first time since he'd quit rodeo, so that some work could be done on his teeth.

"He always was a tough old cuss when he saw that gate behind," said his owner, Tim Bernard, a cattleman of Loomis, Wash. "He lashed out with his hoofs, like in the old days, and died of a heart attack.

Badger Mountain started his career as a show horse in 1932, and that same year he was named the top bucker at the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo. He was a strong and tireless bucker then, of course, but it wasn't until about six years later that he developed an unusual and unpredictable style.

His real specialty was rearing. He could stand on his hind legs like a circus horse, and he would shift his body from side to side while he reared.

No cowboy can stay in a swaying perpendicular saddle for long, as Badger Mountain well knew.

He would come out of the chutes like any bucker, and then after two jumps or ten —whenever he felt like it—up he'd rear and paw at the moon.

And even though that maneuver was enough to topple all comers, Badger Mountain apparently wasn't satisfied. He also developed a high twisting kick of his hind legs.

A cowboy might be all set to cope with his rearing, and that would be the time he'd try the kicking.

He was a big horse, a bay with a bald face, and like most broncs he was no trouble to men except when they tried to ride him.

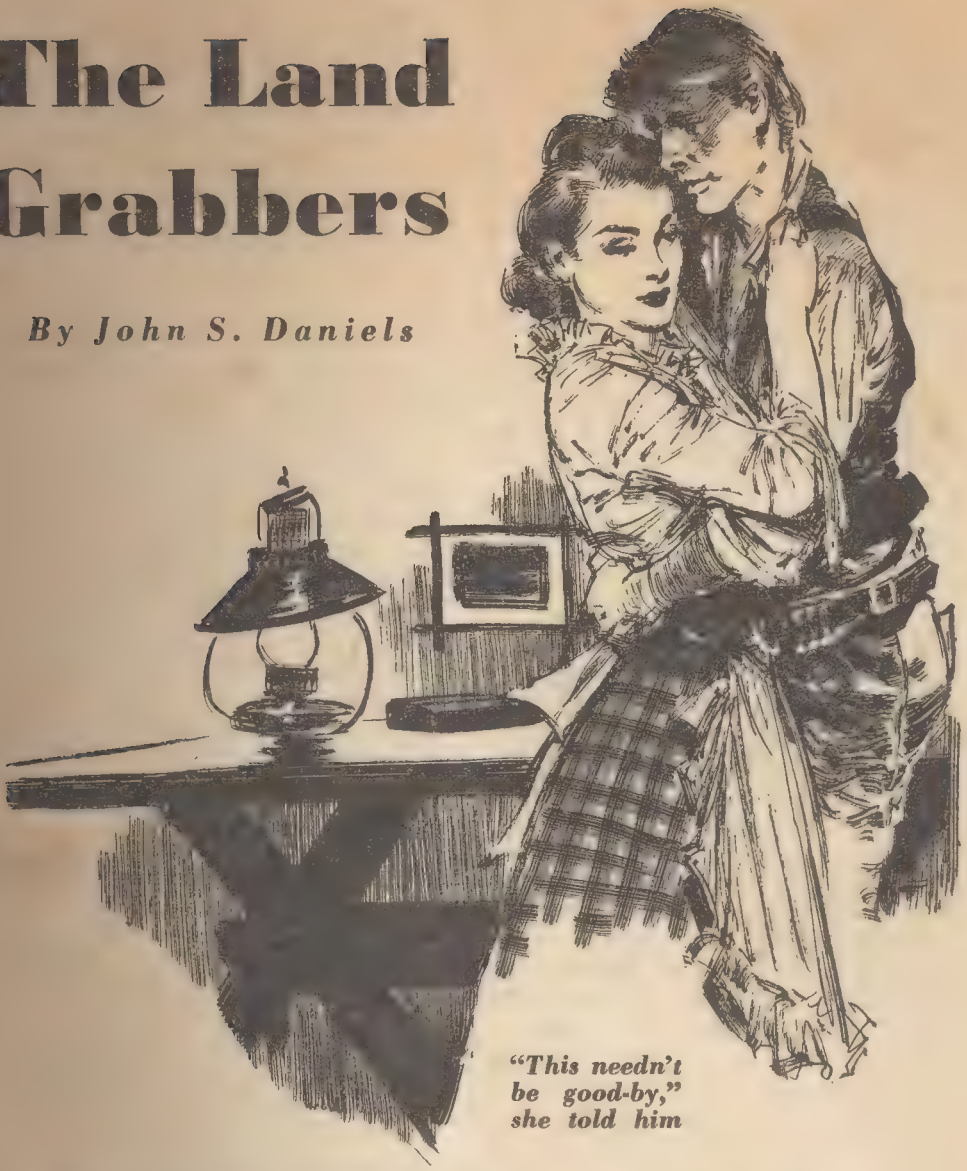
Few buckers are mean, and none of them are stupid. Badger Mountain seemed to love rodeo the way some men love golf or baseball, and like those men he seemed constantly to be improving his technique.

Probably like most broncs, he was a ham who loved the excitement and the applause of the arena. He was too lazy to work for a living pulling a plow, and smart enough to find a way to avoid it.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

The Land Grabbers

By John S. Daniels



"This needn't be good-by," she told him

THE STORY SO FAR: MARK CARDIGAN and JASON MOORE, of the Indian agency, are trying to move the Utes from land now open to new white settlement. Both SUSAN ARCHER, who has promised to marry Mark, and LINDA MOORE, who loves him, fear trouble. Most of the Utes, resigned to broken white men's treaties, go peaceably enough. But the unfriendly ones—and RENO FLEMING'S gunnies—are about to cause trouble. . . .

CONCLUSION

WHEN MARK reached the army post and told Reynolds what had happened, the lieutenant said he would send a wagon after the bodies. Then he added, "You can quit worrying about Leslie's trail crew. We buy a lot of beef from the Box Y. Five of their hands and one of the owners are here now. They

should have headed back for the Gunnison three days ago, but they've been hanging around here to see the fun. I'll send them with Leslie."

"Suppose they won't go?" Mark asked.

"They'll go," Reynolds said grimly. "If they don't, we'll never buy another steer from the Box Y." He grinned sourly. "They've been telling me that if Colorow fires one shot, the army will head for Mexico. I don't like their sense of humor, and now they won't like mine."

Mark stood with one hand gripping the saddlehorn, so tired he was not sure he could stand without support. It was not the fight and the sleepless night that had worn him out as much as the week of waiting, of uncertainty that had kept his nerves constantly taut.

"Say, you're all in," Reynolds said. He turned to call to a trooper, "Nason, take care of Cardigan's horse. Come on in, Mark. Jane will fix up some breakfast."

The trooper led Mark's buckskin toward the stable. Mark stumbled across the parade ground toward officers' houses, his dragging feet stirring the dust. He asked, "You know Reno Fleming?"

"You bet I know him," Reynolds said. "He's the slipperiest devil I ever ran into. A couple of my boys spotted him and another man on the mesa yesterday. They were a long way off, but they got their glasses on them. There wasn't any doubt about it being Fleming. He's pretty well known around here, you know, freighting into Ouray as long as he has. Well, the boys gave them a run, but they got away."

Mark could guess how it had been.

"Just as well the boys didn't bring Fleming and his partner in," Reynolds said. "The guardhouse is full. We've got better than fifty men locked up right now. I suppose there's that many more who are illegally on the reservation right now. I just don't have enough men to patrol the boundary adequately."

"How soon are you letting down the bars?" Mark asked.

"Tomorrow morning at dawn," Reynolds said. "I guess you haven't heard. Colorow's headed for Utah this morning. I just had a dispatch from Colonel Travis. Colorow made his bluff yesterday, although I'm not sure how much bluff it was. He came helling down the valley with three or four hundred bucks behind him, wearing feathers and warpaint and screaming their heads off. The colonel had his men spread across the valley, and when the Utes saw them, they stopped and quit hollering. Pretty soon the bucks started back. Colorow stayed there a long time, just looking at the soldiers, and then he turned around, too."

They reached the Reynolds house and turned up the path. Reynolds said thoughtfully, "Well, you never know. If Colorow's bunch had got past the colonel, they'd have come on up the river and cleaned the post out. I don't have more than a skeleton force here. Then they'd have hit the agency. Hell, we might have had the White River business all over again."

"Could have been as bad," Mark agreed.

Tomorrow the scramble would come and Fleming would have his chance. He would not forget that Mark had shot Nick Bailey; he would not forget that Sorenson had died the same way last night. And Fleming wanted Susan Archer.

In the house, Mark dropped wearily into a chair and laid his hat on the oak center table. Funny about Susan—she had not been in his mind very much these last few days. He had not seen her, and apparently she had not wanted to see him.

"Jane," Reynolds called and crossed the room to the kitchen. "I've got a hungry man out here. How about some breakfast for him?"

MRS. REYNOLDS appeared in the kitchen doorway, a smile coming to her lips when she saw who it was. "So you're the hungry man! Well, we'll see what we can do. Come on back to the kitchen. I'm not going to feed you out here."

Mark got up, yawning widely. He wasn't as hungry as he was sleepy. The run tomorrow seemed anticlimactic. He'd just about as soon go to Utah with Bill Leslie. For the first time in months, the land didn't seem important.

Then, following Mr. Reynolds into the kitchen, he saw Linda standing at the stove, a fork in her hand, a frying pan in front of her. She turned when she heard him, giving him a nod of recognition as if she were not quite sure whether he would be glad to see her or not. She said, "Good morning, Mark. Your breakfast will be ready in a minute. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes. Sure."

He sat down at the table, thinking he always looked like a saddletramp when he saw her.

"I've got to go," Reynolds said. "I'll probably have to shove our farmer friends back half a mile this morning. See you after a while, Mark. I guess you'll be somewhere on the line by morning."

"I reckon," Mark said, his eyes still on Linda. She was wearing a pink gingham dress, a frilly lace apron knotted at the small of her back. Funny he hadn't thought to ask Jason Moore about her. Funnier still he would find her here. Without thinking, he blurted, "Why aren't you with Jason on your way to Utah?"

He realized at once that he shouldn't have asked it, that the question bothered her. She gave him a quick glance, then lowered her gaze to the frying pan, not attempting an answer. Reynolds had reached the living-room doorway, and now he paused and turned to look at Mark, frowning as if he considered the question out of place.

"I asked Miss Moore to be our guest until her uncle thinks it's safe for her to travel," Reynolds said stiffly.

"She's doing me a favor," Mrs. Reynolds added, glancing at her husband. "There are only a few officers' wives at the post, Mark, and every one of them has heard my stories so often they're sick and tired of them. Now I have a brand new victim."

Reynolds went on out of the house. Presently Linda brought Mark's breakfast to him, bacon and eggs and some warmed-up biscuits. She filled his coffee cup again. Mrs. Reynolds had disappeared. Linda sat down across the table from Mark and folded her hands in front of her.

"You think I should have gone with Uncle Jason?" she asked. "Is that it, Mark?"

His mouth was too full to answer for a moment. Then he leaned back. "I apologize for asking about it. I guess I was just surprised to find you here. It's none of my business where you go or stay."

He kept on eating, and she sat there, looking steadily at him. Presently she said, "Mark, I asked you once how much crow you wanted me to eat. I suppose I must eat some more. You see, I was wrong about a lot of things because I just didn't know. I'm not wrong now. I have the answer to the big question that has always bothered me about Uncle Jason."

She got up and filled his coffee cup and sat down again. "If I was in his place, I wouldn't do what he's doing. I mean, the Indians would never be that important to me, but they are to him, so he has to do what he has to do, and that makes him the bravest men I ever knew."

HE HAD no argument with her about Jason Moore, but Mark Cardigan was quite another man. A few minutes before the mesa land had not seemed important. Now, because a perverse streak in him insisted that he show her she was wrong, it had again become important.

He rose. "Thanks for the breakfast."

He walked through the door into the front room and picked up his hat. She called, and he turned slowly to face her. For some reason he saw her more clearly than he had ever seen her before. In the few hours he had been with Linda, she had been tested as few women were ever tested. It came to him, then, that if he married Susan, he would not really know the kind of woman he was getting; but if he married Linda, he would.

Impulsively he moved back across the room to Linda and put his arms around her. He said, "I didn't expect to find you here, but I'm glad I did. It gives us another chance to say good-by. You'll be leaving in a few days. I don't suppose you'll ever be back."

She said nothing for a moment. Her head was tipped back, her eyes on him,

her full, red lips slightly parted. Then she whispered, "Mark, it doesn't have to be good-by."

There was this moment, his arms around her soft, pliant body, his lips close to hers. He blurted out, "You wouldn't stay here and live on a piece of Indian land, would you?"

"I didn't intend to say what I did." She was embarrassed, her face scarlet. "Good-by, Mark, and good luck."

She pulled herself free of his arms and ran into the kitchen. He left the house, walking slowly, once more feeling the utter weariness that was in every bone and muscle of his body.

When he did drop off to sleep, he lay as motionless as if he were dead, utterly exhausted. There was little activity around the post, for most of the soldiers were moving down-river behind the retreating Utes, or with Lieutenant Reynolds at the reservation line.

MARK would have slept on far into the night if a racket had not broken out. At first it stirred him to restless semiconsciousness. He stirred, burrowing deeper into the hay, and then, because it grew louder, he finally sat up, rubbing his face and wishing they would go somewhere else to squabble.

He got up and brushed chaff from his clothes, and quite suddenly realized that Susan was making most of the noise. That knowledge wiped the last cobweb of sleep from his mind and he ran out of the stable.

Susan was standing in front of the guardhouse, holding the reins of her horse in one hand, the other knotted into a tight little fist was being shaken very close to Sergeant Murphy's flat, red nose. She was screaming at the top of her voice, "Who is in command here, I'd like to know? You say Colonel Travis is twenty miles from here and Lieutenant Reynolds is at the reservation line, but who's responsible for locking my father up? If you are, I'll quirt you till your own mother wouldn't know your face."

Murphy had backed up until he stood against the guardhouse wall. Now, his red face considerably redder than usual, he put out a big hand and pushed Susan back a full step. "Now you better listen to me before I lose my temper," he bellowed at her. "I can't release your father until Lieutenant Reynolds gives the order."

As Mark started running toward them, Susan tried to hit Murphy, but his arm was too long. Then she began to swear, using words she might have borrowed from Reno Fleming.

"Saddle my horse," Mark shouted at Nason, the trooper standing nearby. "I'll get her out of here." He went over and tried to pull her back from Murphy.

"You do that, Cardigan," Murphy roared, "or I'll throw her into the guardhouse with the rest of the pilgrims. I never seen the likes of her before."

Suddenly the violence went out of Susan. She apparently realized who was holding her and she put her head against his chest and began to cry. Murphy said, "I brung her dad in off the mesa yesterday. I guess she didn't know until today we had him locked up."

Susan regained control of herself before Nason led Mark's buckskin out of the stable. She looked up at Mark, whispering, "You'll make them let Daddy go, won't you? You know Reynolds. Tell him Daddy can't make the run unless they turn him loose."

"Get on your horse, Susan," he said.

Obediently she turned from him and taking his hand, stepped into the saddle. He mounted, and they rode up the valley toward the reservation boundary. Susan's head tipped forward as if she could not bring herself to look at Mark. She had made a fool of herself and she was ashamed, he thought, but she didn't apologize. The thought came to him that she was still concerned about her father, and nothing else mattered.

The sun was well over to the west now, their shadows long in front of them on the white road dust. Mark noticed a fog rising on the other side of the valley. Bill Leslie had strung out his herd with the help Reynolds had sent him. He hadn't been too sleepy or tired to get under way.

SUDDENLY Susan burst out, "Mark, you can find Reynolds and make him let Daddy loose, can't you?"

"No. I couldn't make Reynolds do anything."

She glared at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to curse him as she had Sergeant Murphy. Then she turned her head from him. Her fury had burned out. She was too miserable to do anything except say listlessly, "I never loved anyone in my life but Daddy. He counted so much on making the run. He wanted to live up there on the mesa beside me and Reno."

Me and *Reno!* She had forgotten who she was talking to. Or perhaps she didn't care. He stared at her, this slender, dark-eyed girl with the tip-tilted nose and the freckles on her cheeks, this girl he had hoped to make his wife.

She had not, he thought, intended to tell him that. Well, there would be no more talk of love between them, no more talk of a wedding date, and he wondered why she had said what she had at the agency when he'd returned with Linda. It didn't make any difference now. The only thing that seemed important was the certainty that Fleming and Tisley had eluded the soldiers. They were up there somewhere on the mesa now, but he still didn't know why and he would not, under any condition, ask Susan.

When they reached the line, he was surprised at the number of settlers that were here. Mark turned with Susan as she swung toward the river, some of the settlers calling friendly greetings. Mark answered with a wave of the hand. Susan ignored them. When she reached the Archer wagon, she reined up and swung down. She said, not looking at Mark, "Good-by."

"Good-by," he said, and rode on toward the river to the soldiers' camp.

FROM their hiding place on the mesa, Fleming and Tisley, early Sunday afternoon, watched Susan ride north toward the army post, her slim body taut with the fury that gripped her. She had brought them supplies, and word that the reservation would be opened in the morning. She had stopped at Leslie's camp and heard what had happened to Sorenson, so she had been able to tell them about that.

Susan had expected to find her father with Fleming, and when she got around to asking about him and found out he was in the guardhouse at the cantonment, she blew up. She cursed Fleming for letting it happen, then she cursed the army, and when she finally ran down, she flung herself on her horse and headed out across the mesa.

Tisley, who had always considered Susan an unnecessary weakness for a man of Fleming's caliber, could not restrain a grin. He said, "Reno, pound for pound that girl's more wildcat than any other female I ever seen. You'll never tame her."

Fleming said, his voice quite mild, "Rustle some grub, will you? I'm a mite proddy, what with the run coming off tomorrow and Alec getting plugged and everything."

"And your gal cussing you like she was a muleskinner," the gunman said testily. "I tell you, Reno, I don't trust her. She was supposed to see Cardigan this week and find out just where the land is he wants, but no, she didn't have time. Hell's bells, Reno, she had all the time in the world before this. Cardigan must have told her, but she's playing you. . ."

"I'll do my own figuring on this deal," Fleming said. "Get a fire going."

A fire was dangerous, but it was a risk they had to take. They had not seen a patrol all morning, and Fleming had a hunch they wouldn't. This being the day before the rush, the soldiers were probably needed on the reservation line. During the past week, they had seen a number of patrols, but they had never come close to being picked up. It was not Fleming's fault that Ed Archer had been stupid enough to let himself get caught, and Susan had no call to blame him. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got.

Fleming sat with his back against a rock, glowering at nothing in particular. Tisley, sensing the ugly temper that ruled Fleming, said nothing until he called that the meal was ready. Usually Fleming was a heavy

eater, but today he wasn't hungry. He kept thinking about what Tisley had said. The same suspicion had been nagging at his mind, and now to hear Tisley voice the same doubt was too much.

Actually Fleming did not need to know where the land was located that Cardigan wanted. He had first supposed, judging from the way Susan had always talked, that Cardigan was planning a big ditch the same as Fleming himself had planned. But after going over the mesa carefully with Sorenson, it occurred to Fleming that Cardigan probably wanted to just settle down beside Old Flint, who was a friend of his. The mountain man did have a natural site for a reservoir.

BY RIDING early in the mornings before the patrols got out and in the evenings after they had returned to the cantonment, Fleming and Sorenson had thoroughly explored the mesa. Sorenson had pointed out where water could be taken from the river and the line the ditch would have to take.

"Looks to me like there's about twenty thousand acres of mesa land that would be under your ditch," Sorenson had said. "It's good land, but them pilgrims that are waiting down yonder will keep in the valley. None of 'em will think about coming up here." Then he'd grinned at Fleming. "Except Cardigan."

Sorenson had refused to have anything more to do with the proposed ditch. "I've got Slim Rolly and the Lowrie boys working for Leslie. Worked slicker'n goose grease. The last of the week I'll go down there and knock off Cardigan and the Indian kid, then Rolly will plug Leslie. Nobody'll know the herd's gone until we're over the mountain. You're a fool, Reno, passing up a deal that'd make you rich in a week."

But Sorenson had been the fool, Fleming reflected. First Nick Bailey had died before Cardigan's gun, and now Alec Sorenson.

As the afternoon wore on, Fleming's slow rage grew until it became a bright flame of fury. Actually, and he was forced to admit it, his dislike for Cardigan, instinctive from the first, had changed to virulent hatred more on account of Susan than because Cardigan had shot and killed Nick Bailey and Alec Sorenson.

Possibly Susan didn't care whether Fleming killed Cardigan or whether Cardigan killed Fleming as long as she was around to marry the one who survived.

Tisley lay on his back, his head on his saddle, motionless and silent while Fleming's fury grew until it was unbearable. He had to do something. Sitting here and waiting for morning was intolerable. He got up and slammed his hat on his head. He pulled his gun and checked it.

Tisley asked lazily, "Who we beefing tonight?"

"Didn't say we'd beef anybody. I'm taking over Old Flint's place."

Tisley held his questions until they saddled their horses and started down the creek, the sun well down in the west. Then he said, "Reno, I've always gone along when you started something. I never figured like Alec, always looking for the big dinero. You've paid me good enough, so I've been satisfied."

Fleming gave him a sour look. "Well?"

"Hell, man, you've been eating loco weed. Sure, a lot of things have happened, like Alec getting plugged, but that ain't enough to make a man go off his rocker. Getting cussed by your girl ain't, either."

"I ain't off my rocker," Fleming said harshly. "I want Old Flint's place for two reasons, and they're both good. He's got a natural reservoir site which I need. This fall I'll dam the creek and fill the reservoir. It's like Alec said—the first pilgrims will stay on the river, but the crop that comes in next spring will be up here looking for land. When they see what I've got started, they'll settle right here below me. The big ditch will come later. If the creek won't run enough water to keep the reservoir full, I'll have the ditch to help out."

TISLEY gave Fleming a tight-lipped grin. "That sounds real smart, Reno, but you ain't jumping Old Flint's claim just to grab a reservoir site, are you?"

Fleming swore. "Not by a hell of a lot. I don't know where Cardigan aims to settle, but I know he's Old Flint's friend, so I'm pretty sure he'll show up there first thing in the morning."

"Well now," Tisley said, "that's better. We'll square up for Alec, and chances are Susie will be along, and we'll find how she stands."

"Yeah, we'll find out," Fleming said sullenly, and was silent.

They drew up in front of the cabin and Fleming called, "Old Flint!" The door banged open and the mountain man stood there, a cocked Winchester held on Fleming, his lined, old face as hard as a weathered pine knot.

"Get out of here," Old Flint yelled. "You've got no right on the reservation today."

"I'm not here to have any trouble with you," Fleming said in what he thought was a reasonable voice. "I'll give you any price you want that's fair and you can hike out for Utah now and be with your squaw."

Old Flint let out a squall that was animal-like in its fierceness. He brought the Winchester to his shoulder and for one terrible, sustained second Fleming thought he was a dead man. But Tisley had sensed what was coming and had reached for his gun. Apparently Old Flint caught the motion of Tisley's hand as it started downward.

He swung his rifle to Tisley and pulled the trigger before the gunman's Colt was out of leather.

Fleming had time to make his draw. Before Old Flint's rifle could swing back to him, he shot the mountain man in the chest, knocking him off his feet and putting him flat on his back in the middle of the cabin.

Fleming swung out of the saddle, keeping Old Flint covered, for he wasn't sure whether he had killed the man or not. As he walked toward the cabin door, he was aware that Tisley's horse had begun to pitch and that Tisley was on the ground.

The stench from the cabin stopped Fleming momentarily, then he went on through the door and saw in his first glance that Old Flint was dead. He backed out and swung around, taking a long breath, and it was then he knew Tisley was dead, too. Old Flint had got him squarely between the eyes.

Fleming looked around, suddenly realizing that if any soldiers were within earshot, they'd come on to see what the firing was about; but there was no sign of life on the mesa.

He glanced at the sun. Almost down. Tisley's horse had stopped bucking and stood motionless, looking at Fleming, his ears forward. The first thing to do was to get rid of the horses, Fleming decided. He'd leave Old Flint's pinto in the corral. He led his and Tisley's mounts toward the creek, angling downstream. He stripped saddles from them, staked them out behind the willows along the creek, and returned to the cabin, confident that they would be hidden from the eyes of anyone riding in from the east.

Fleming carried Tisley's body inside and dropped it beside Old Flint's. He went out again, pulling the door shut behind him. Then he sat down, the evening sunlight upon him. He was alone, more alone than he had been for a long time.

FEW, IF ANY, of the settlers who were waiting on the line slept that Sunday night. Mark, still squatting beside the soldiers' fire, sensed a definite change not long before dawn. The singing and shouting died as if it had been cut off by order, and with the silence came a tension that lay like a great invisible weight upon all of them.

Presently a band of riders came in from the west, a large number, judging by the sound. They scattered out when they reached the line, and a few minutes later Reynolds and Sergeant Murphy rode into the firelight and dismounted.

The instant Murphy saw Mark, he said, "We brought your girl's pappy in. If it had been me, I'd have let that bunch of boomers rot in the guardhouse, but the lieutenant here figured they ought to have their chance."

Reynolds picked up a tin cup and filled it with coffee. He gulped it, shivering a little, for the air had turned very sharp and it had been a long time since he had warmed at the fire. He put the cup down, nodding at Mark. "Better saddle up," he said.

Mark rose, hearing the jingle of chain harness as teams were hooked up, the strained oaths of nervous men struggling with stubborn horses, the cry of a baby far down the line and the frantic voice of a woman trying to comfort it.

Suddenly Mark was aware that someone was coming up behind him. He wheeled, hand instinctively reaching for his gun.

Reynolds called, "It's me, Mark. I should have sung out, but I didn't know you were so jumpy."

"Neither did I," Mark admitted.

"What's bothering you, Mark?" Reynolds asked as they walked back to the fire.

"Fleming. And his partner Tisley. It's a pretty good bet I'll find 'em before sundown, or they'll find me."

"I could send a patrol up there . . ."

"No," Mark said sharply.

Mark had not told Reynolds the truth, not all of it. Something else was bothering him a great deal more than the prospect of having a run-in with Fleming. Then, because he had to ask someone, he blurted, "Jeff, did you have any doubts about being in love with your wife? I mean, before you were married?"

"I never did, Mark. I've learned one thing, though. No man can tell another man who to love." Reynolds was silent for a time, then he added hesitantly, as if not sure he should say it, "But I will tell you this. Whoever gets Linda Moore will be a lucky man."

Reynolds swung away toward the bugler who stood on the other side of the fire. Mark stepped into the saddle. So Reynolds had guessed. Or maybe it had been his wife. But Mark could not turn back now. He could not go to Linda and tell her he hadn't even made the run. His pride would not let him.

Behind Mark above the mountain peaks the sky was turning rose, and among the clinging clouds an occasional streak of sheer scarlet glowed. It seemed to Mark that no one was breathing. Reynolds stood close to the fire, his watch in one hand, the other raised above his head. A few feet away the bugler was watching him intently.

All along the line there was no sound except a horse pawing the ground, or kicking at his teammate, and a man's subdued voice trying to quiet the animal. Then the baby started to cry again.

Reynolds' upraised hand flashed down. The bugle's shrill tone pierced the dawn air, and the tension exploded in a roar of sound.

THE THUNDER of hundreds of driving hoofs rolled across the valley as teams and saddle horses broke into action. Men's voices added to the clatter, for now every mind held one thought: get ahead of the others, find the claim you want, stake it and then hold it, with your Winchester if that's what it takes.

Mark got the jump on the others, swinging toward the mesa before he had ridden half a mile. The light was still so thin that no one, unless he was very close, would know where he was going. Not that it made any real difference. No one would follow but the Archers, and they were considerably behind and to his right.

The climb to the mesa was short but steep. When Mark reached the top, he pulled up to let the buckskin blow. He waited there while the light became stronger, and he could see the rigs that were moving down the valley, made small by distance. Some had already run into trouble, smashed a wheel or turned over or crashed into another outfit. But most of them were still in the race, stringing out now that there had been time for the faster horses to move ahead. On beyond the rigs were the horsebackers, vague and indistinct to Mark's eyes, some of them probably out of sight already.

Mark went on, holding the buckskin to a slower pace. The sun rose above the

mountain peaks, and then it was full day, with shadows receding from the lower valley and the eastern slopes of the hills and ridges that lay ahead of Mark. Presently he felt the sun's heat on his back.

He stopped often to let his horse rest, a precaution as much as anything, for he had no idea where he could find Fleming. The man was up here.

Mark was sure of that, and he was equally sure that Fleming would not be above drygulching him.

He rode past the place where the army had camped. Now there was nothing where the tents had been.

Colonel Travis and his troopers would be far downriver, hard on the heels of Colorow and his men.

A few minutes later Old Flint's cabin came into sight. The mountain man would be looking for him, and Mark expected him to be outside, waving his battered hat and yelling for him to come on and get his stakes down. But he was not in sight. The only sign of life around the place was the old man's pinto in the corral.

Then Mark noticed that there was no trace of smoke rising from the chimney. Even though the morning was hot and the old man had let the fire die down, there should be a hint of smoke still rising from the stone chimney into the motionless air.

For a long time Mark sat his saddle there in the hot sunlight, the truth finally coming to him, slowly because he did not want to believe it. Someone who had been hiding out up here on the mesa had jumped Old Flint's claim. He would not have gone off and left it because he had been aware that this very thing might happen, that some greedy land grabber would want his claim for the corral and cabin and garden spot if nothing else.

Mark had no illusions about how this whole thing would go. Possession was all that counted now, and there was bound to be a good deal of claim jumping. The hardy ones would survive, the weak ones would be pushed off the better claims, or killed. There was no authority except the army, and Reynolds lacked the force it would take to police an area this large.

Mark stared at the weatherbeaten log wall of the cabin, thinking that if the claim-jumper was Fleming, then Tisley had probably taken the quarter section downstream. That was the land Mark wanted.

If Fleming was hiding in the cabin, he was undoubtedly waiting for Mark to come closer, to be sure of his shot. So it seemd to Mark that he had only one choice. He could swing to his left, and by using the willows as a screen, go down the creek until he reached the land he wanted. If Tisley was there, they'd have it out. If he wasn't Mark would pound down his stakes and fight any man who tried to take the land from him.

BUT HE KNEW he could do nothing of the kind. Old Flint had been his friend. Mark drew his gun and rode slowly toward the cabin. There was no window in the wall he was approaching, but it would be a simple matter to knock out some of the chinking and push a gun barrel between two logs. He reined up again, knowing that to go any closer was suicide.

"Hello the cabin," Mark called.

No answer for a moment, no movement of any kind, then Reno Fleming stepped into view. His hands were at his sides, and Mark saw that he was not wearing his gun. He shouted, "Come on in, Cardigan. I've been waiting for you all morning."

Mark stepped down so that his buckskin was between him and Fleming, convinced that this was a trap. Probably Tisley was inside, drawing a bead on him right now. He cursed himself for a fool. He'd got his tail in a crack for sure. If he jumped onto his horse and made a run for the willows, he'd get a bullet before he'd gone ten feet.

"Come on, come on," Fleming shouted derisively, "if you ain't yellow. This doesn't call for guns, Cardigan. I'm gonna kill you with my hands."

"Sounds good for you to talk about me being yellow," Mark called, "with Tisley inside waiting to plug me."

Without a word Fleming wheeled into the cabin. A moment later he returned

and threw Tisley's body onto the ground. "Old Flint beefed Tisley yesterday when we rode up here. I'm alone, Cardigan. Just you'n me; then it'll be just me. I aim to square up for Bailey and Sorenson."

Still Mark did not move away from his horse. Fleming might have another man inside the cabin, someone Mark didn't know. Fleming wasn't a man to be honest when it came to a question of survival.

"Where's Old Flint?" Mark shouted.

Again Fleming went into the cabin and this time he came out with the mountain man's body, throwing it down beside Tisley's as callously as he'd drop a sack of grain. "I got him when he plugged Tisley. Put up your gun, Cardigan, and come on. This time Susie won't be around to stop me."

For a long moment Mark stood rigid. He had been reasonably certain that Old Flint was dead. Still, it had been natural for him to cling to the slim hope it was not true. Now, staring at the ragged bundle that had been his friend, the other Mark Cardigan took charge, the man who would not leave here until he had killed Reno Fleming.

He stepped away from his horse, his gun holstered. "Get your iron, Fleming."

The freighter threw back his head and laughed. "You're a little too handy with your artillery, bucko. I don't aim to give you no such chance. Take off your gunbelt and come on in. I'm gonna break your neck, Cardigan. I'm gonna kick in your ribs and scatter your guts all over the place." He paused, his big hands at his sides, and then added slowly, "Only I guess you're too yellow to fight me again."

Mark moved toward Fleming, walking slowly, breathing hard. He knew exactly the risk he was taking. He looked at Old Flint's body and then at Fleming's face, and he realized there could be nothing halfway about this. He would be an executioner, or a dead man.

"What kind of a trick have you got up your sleeve?" Mark asked.

Fleming flung an obscene word at him. "I don't need a trick to handle you. You never licked me when I wasn't drunk, and I sure as hell ain't drunk now." He rubbed his hands on his pants' legs, the corners of his mouth twitching. "You've always been between me and Susie, Cardigan. I've waked up at night dreaming that I had my hands on your throat. That's where I'm gonna put 'em now. The only trick I needed was one to get you in here. I figured Old Flint's carcass would be enough."

Mark stopped twenty feet from Fleming, startled by the one sentence: "You've always been between me and Susie." So Fleming had no more reason to trust her than Mark had. But at least Mark would not give him the satisfaction of knowing what Susan had said about her father wanting to live up here on the mesa "beside me and Reno."

Fleming shouted. "Damn you, Cardigan, throw away that gun."

For just a moment Mark hesitated, wishing he could cut Fleming down in cold blood, but he couldn't. He unbuckled his gunbelt and flung it toward the cabin. His regret was a fleeting one. Fleming rushed at him, and he was fighting for his life.

MARK swung to one side, jolting the big man with a sledging right that stopped Fleming in his tracks and swiveled his head half around. He followed with rights and lefts, landing more blows than he received, and he forced Fleming back.

Mark had better coordination than Fleming, and he was faster on his feet. They were the two advantages he held, and they were advantages only as long as he stayed on his feet. Fleming understood that. Now he made a stand, big legs spread, blood streaming down his face as he licked meaty lips. Head down, he drove at Mark. Again Mark swung to one side; he brought a whistling right through to the side of Fleming's head and knocked him down.

Thinking that Fleming was hurt more than he was, Mark fell on him, his doubled-up knees striking Fleming in the belly just below the ribs. He heard wind gush out of Fleming's lungs and he hammered him in the face. He had hurt Fleming, but not enough. The fellow got his great arms

around the small of Mark's back and squeezed.

For a terrible moment Mark thought he was being broken in two. He couldn't breathe; he couldn't break free. He was unable to get enough leverage to arch his back and loosen Fleming's grip, but he knew he could not stand much of this.

Mark's face was close to Fleming's; he saw the bulging blue veins and the smeared blood and sweat, and he smelled the fetid odor of the man's breath, all of this in one drawn-out instant of time. Then, acting sheerly from instinct, he slammed his head downward with all the strength he had.

His hat had fallen off. He didn't know when. The top of his skull caught Fleming's nose and felt it mash. Blood spurted in a scarlet stream and Fleming let out an involuntary bellow of pain, his grip momentarily relaxed. Mark broke free, and falling to one side, rolled away. He got to his feet and backed off, sucking air into his tortured lungs.

He expected Fleming to be on him at once, but the man was slow getting up. Mark rushed in and kicked him in the side. Fleming went flat again, but as he dropped, he reached out and grabbed Mark's boot and brought him down. Mark jerked free and scrambled away, frantically struggling on his hands and knees. Fleming grabbed at him again, breathing hard and knowing he was lucky to be on his feet.

Fleming, up now, his face smeared with blood, drove in once more, but he moved slowly, like a tired and baffled bull. Mark hammered him with both fists, but he could not stop him. Fleming had just one idea in mind. He threw his big arms wide, and Mark, failing to sidestep quickly enough, once more felt Fleming's powerful grip around his middle.

Mark rammed a knee upward into Fleming's belly. He had his hands free and he slugged the big man in the kidney. Fleming grunted, but still he hung on, pushing Mark back, and they went down.

Fleming let go as they fell, but he was on top, and now Mark saw the sunlight

[*Turn page*]

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gleam on the bright blade of a knife in Fleming's hand. The thought flashed through Mark's mind that he was a dead man, that this was the treachery Fleming had intended from the first.

Fleming had the knife in his right hand; he raised it and brought it down, his battered face mirroring the maniacal passion that gripped him. Mark threw the upper part of his body sideways. He could not move his legs and hips that were pinned uder Fleming's greater weight. The knife, aimed at Mark's chest, sliced through his shirt and ripped his flesh under his left arm.

CURSING, Fleming yanked the knife free, blood and sweat and spit drooling from his bruised mouth. Mark rammed a thumb upward into Fleming's right eye. Fleming squalled in agony, and Mark, shoving hard against the man's weight, rolled him to one side.

Mark regained his feet. He had not heard the wagon; he did not know the Archers were there until Susan's father shouted, "Get up, Reno, get up and kill the bastard." But their presence made no difference to either Mark or Fleming.

They faced each other, both winded. For a moment they stood that way, panting, tears running down Fleming's cheek from his right eye to mingle with the sweat and blood. His knife was held in front of him, blade pointed at Mark like a splinter of sunlight; then he moved forward again, the knife swinging out in a vicious swipe that would have disemboweled Mark if it had connected. But Fleming, seeing little if anything from his right eye, misjudged the distance between them and the steel missd by inches.

Fleming stumbled and was turned partly around by the force of the blow he had missed. Mark slugged him on the neck, and Fleming, off balance, floundered in an effort to regain his footing. Mark had this split second and he used it, grabbing Fleming's right forearm with both hands and twisting it so that the blade pointed at Fleming's belly.

Mark heard Susan's terrified scream. He did not look at her. He saw terror in Fleming's one good eye. The man was afraid of his own knife. Unable to break Mark's grip, he swung wildly with his left fist, and missing, went down. Mark fell on him, still clinging to his right arm, the knife pointed at Fleming's belly. Fleming's weight drove the blade into his abdomen to the hilt. When Mark struggled to his feet, he saw that Fleming would not get up.

For a time the earth tipped and whirled in front of Mark. He rubbed his face, his hands coming away wet with blood and sweat. He lurched toward the cabin and picking up his gunbelt, buckled it around him. He did not trust Ed Archer, but when he looked at the man, he saw that he had nothing to fear from him. Archer was ready to run. But not Susan. She stepped down from the wagon and came to Mark.

"You're alive, Mark," she whispered. "I'm so glad. I was afraid he was going to kill you."

She cared nothing about Fleming's death. Mark Cardigan was alive, so she turned to him as if nothing had ever come between them. Mark put his back against the cabin wall and drew his gun, hating Susan Archer as he had never dreamed he could hate a woman.

"You doublecrossing little witch," he said. "Get in that wagon. Keep going, Ed. If I ever see you on reservation land, I'll kill you."

"Come on, Susan," Archer ordered.

She looked at Mark as if he had physically hurt her. "Mark, you can't . . ."

"You've told me good-by twice," he said. "You told me you never loved anyone but your father. Well, you've still got him. Go on now, while you have."

She whirled and ran to the wagon and climbed into the seat, not looking at Fleming's body. Archer got the wagon turned and whipped the team into a gallop.

Wearily Mark dropped his gun into holster and wiped his face again, asking himself how any man could be as wrong about a woman as he had been wrong about Susan. Everything she had done, everything she had said, every kiss she

had given him: all had been lies. She had thought first and last of her father.

He found his hat and put it on. For a moment he stood looking down at Old Flint's body, and it seemed to him that this white man who had married a squaw and been taken into the tribe symbolized all the Utes, their dreams and hopes and final defeat.

He had heard them say with pride, "We are the Tabbeguache, the Children of the Sun. Keeche Manitou gave us the river and the valleys and the mountains because we were brave." But they had lost their heritage. Perhaps Old Flint had thought he was winning a small victory for them by staying. He would stay, forever.

Mark picked up the old man's body and carried it inside the cabin and laid it on the bunk, then covered it with a blanket and went out. He closed the door and had to lean against it as a wave of dizziness struck him. He had taken a savage beating and the wound under his left arm was bleeding steadily. Wadding up his bandanna, he placed it over the knife slash, and started toward his horse.

ONCE he fell, and he lay there a moment, his eyes closed. He would be all right if he could get to the army post. If he didn't, he would die here on the mesa. It was unlikely that anyone would be up here for days, or even weeks.

He struggled to his feet and lurched toward his horse. When he reached the buckskin, he clutched the saddlehorn, believing he was going to faint. He was not thinking coherently, but it seemed to him he could see Linda, could hear her voice, and that she was calling to him.

He pulled himself into the saddle and turned the horse toward the army post. He rode with one hand gripping the horn, his head tipped forward, and presently a thought impulse began nagging his numbed mind. He had to get off the mesa. If he could reach the road . . . After that nothing was clear, but he had a vague feeling the horse was picking its way down a steep

[*Turn page*]

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slope and after that was on level ground.

Then water was spurting away from him under the horse's hoofs. Mark was suddenly struck by an impulse to let go and fall off and just lie in the river where he would be cool and he could drink all he wanted. But his hand seemed glued to the horn, and before it would respond to his mental order, his horse had climbed the north bank and dust was rising from his hoofs instead of water.

He was on the road that ran south like a narrow chalk line drawn through the rabbit brush and sage. Someone was behind him, calling to him. He tried to turn his head: he got his hand free from the horn, and then he was falling, falling into eternal blackness.

Mark did not know where he was when he came to, but he heard a man say, "That wound isn't dangerous, Lieutenant, unless it gets infected; but he's bruised all over. What he needs is rest."

"He'll get it," Reynolds said, "and some first-class nursing to boot."

Mark saw that he was in a small room, his bed close to the log walls, and the smells that came to him bothered him, sweet woman smells, lavendar perhaps. Reynolds was looking down at him. Linda was there, too. And Mrs. Reynolds.

"You tangle with a grizzly?" Reynolds asked.

"Fleming," Mark whispered. "They killed Old Flint. He ought to be buried like a white man." Then he looked at Linda, who reached down to take his hand, and he dropped off again.

The next time he came to it was night, with a lamp burning beside the bed. When he tried to turn, pain wracked his body. He heard Linda say, "You're all right, Mark. Lie still."

She was sitting beside him, leaning forward, the lamplight on her auburn hair. He asked, "Do all angels look like you?"

She laughed. "I really don't know, Mark. I haven't seen many angels."

He knew now where he was; in one of Lieutenant Reynolds's bedrooms, probably the one they had given Linda. "I'm in your bed. I ran you out of yours, didn't I?"

"I don't mind." She laughed again. "The truth is, Mark, I can't think of any man I'd rather have in my bed than you."

He didn't feel like laughing with her. He didn't feel like talking, either, but there was something he had to say. "I've been mixed up some." He licked dry lips. "I guess I was just too damned stubborn to back up from what I'd set my mind on doing. You and Jason were right. I couldn't take the land. Not after they killed Old Flint."

She nodded as if she understood. He remembered what Jason Moore had said, that sometimes a man's honor would not permit him to do what the law would.

He was too tired to think about it any more. All he knew was that he just didn't want the land. Whatever their life was, his and Linda's, it would not be here.

Their life! His and Linda's. He stared at her, realizing how much he was taking for granted. He blurted, "I love you, Linda. It isn't too late to tell you, is it? To ask you to marry me?"

"Of course it's not too late. I've wanted so much for you to ask me."

She leaned toward him and kissed him, her hand gripping his.

THE END

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 45)

1. No Man's Land.
2. A rigging of rope or ropes and straps by which the movement of a horse's front feet can be controlled so as to throw him down when running, or teach him to stop without falling, when so ordered. Used in horse training.
3. Texas.
4. California.
5. Alberta and British Columbia.
6. Breaking broncs.
7. Texas.
8. Ray-MOO-thah or ray-MOO-dah.
9. A wickiup is a crude Indian shelter built of brush, a hogan is a Navajo hut of logs and mud, a tipi is an Indian tent, a jacal is a Mexican hut built of upright posts or poles stuck in the ground and usually plastered over with mud.
10. Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Mexico.

OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from Page 6)

reading. I do find them all to be in good taste. I am a diabetic in the hospital for treatment as I have been for over 2½ months, and it will be nice to get letters from healthy people. I'm 42 years old and like the good outdoor life.

DAVID HOUSE

410 Minner Ave.
Oil Dale, Calif.

First Try

Dear Editor:

I hope my first try at getting into Our Air Mail is successful. I'm 15 years old and stand 5'6" tall and weigh 110 lbs. I love to swim and enjoy all sports. I would like to hear from girls and boys about my age, and service men.

PHYLLIS McNUTLY

Eozad, Nebr.

Talented Lad

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely boy from Texas, 24 years old, black hair and blue eyes. I weigh 150 lbs. and stand 5'9" tall. I would like to hear from gals from all over the world and promise to answer all letters. I like to dance and sing; also, I play the guitar, mandolin, banjo, and harmonica. My nickname is Cisco.

OTIST ALFORD

Route 3, Garrison, Tex.

Lonely Bachelor

Dear Editor:

I enjoy your fine magazine and would like to join Our Air Mail column. I am a Navy veteran 26 years old, 5'10½" tall and weigh 165 lbs. I have brown eyes and sandy-red hair. I enjoy most sports. Would like to correspond with young ladies between the ages of 21 to 26. I live alone and batch and I am rather lonely.

JIM COLLINS

Box 961, Grove, Okla.

Likes Mail—But That's All

Dear Editor:

Hope I may get a little space in your letter department. I am 32, 5'9", single, of British descent. I detest music (or anything musical) radio, T.V., sports and people, but wouldn't mind writing to other young people. Would like to hear from any others with unusual likes and dislikes, about their occupations, abilities, interests, and beliefs. Will answer all who write. I am interested in and collect supernatural stories (true only) and have been all over the world, although I am not particularly fond of travel.

ARTHUR MAIDMAN

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